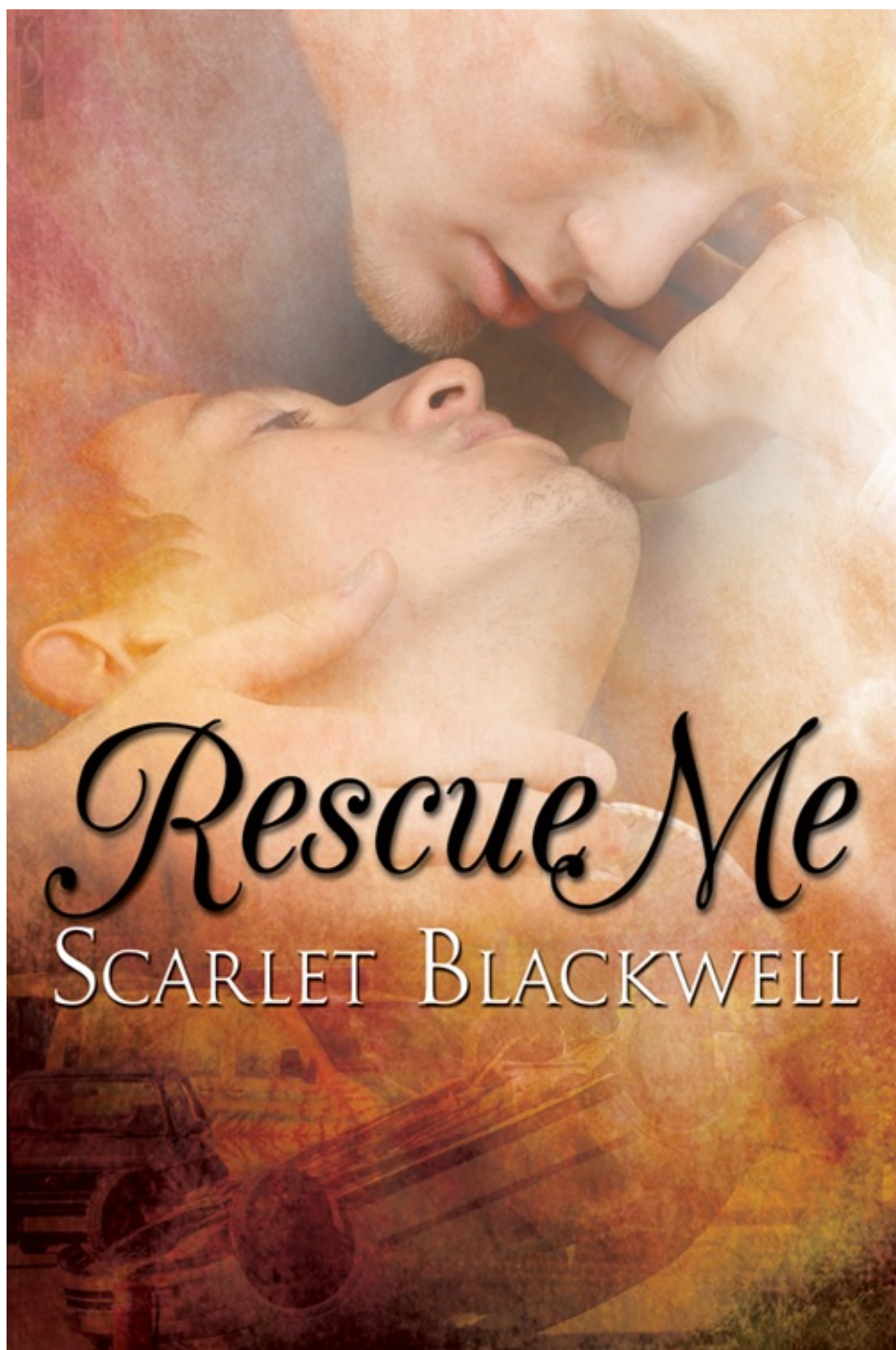


# *Rescue Me*

SCARLET BLACKWELL





Rescue Me

Scarlet Blackwell

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# Dedication

## For my mother

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*The Picture of Dorian Gray, by Oscar Wilde* *November Rain*: Guns N' Roses  
*Wuthering Heights, by Emily Brontë* PART ONE

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# Chapter One

In the accident which almost cost Matthew Harmon his life and put him in intensive care for a month, he sat trapped in the front seat of his beautiful Lamborghini Gallardo Spyder for an hour and a half, appallingly lucid for most of it while firemen cut him free. A shattered pelvis and snapped left femur made him delirious with pain while the questing fingers of his right hand told him the edges of his left fibula and tibia stuck grotesquely through the skin.

His left arm wouldn't work, the shoulder dislocated and the clavicle fractured, every breath agony as his broken ribs collapsed his left lung and ruptured his spleen. The detonating airbag bruised his face, and flying glass sliced him open from ear to mouth. He sat with a mouth full of his own blood and prayed to God for the first time in his life.

Shock had taken him by the time he was airlifted to the hospital with an unreadable blood pressure, bleeding internally, losing it almost quicker than the doctors and nurses at the hospital could replace it. In the emergency surgery which followed he had his spleen removed and a large amount of metal work screwed in to fixate his broken bones, guaranteeing he would never be able to walk through a metal detector at the airport again without setting 7

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off alarms. Fifteen sutures put his face back together. Acute renal failure developed before he even made it to intensive care, and the removal of his spleen guaranteed a bout of pancreatitis.

For several days, it seemed like he might die, but he was young and strong, and against the odds, he survived.

Once off the ventilator, he awoke to grim reality. A permanent scar marred the left side of his face. A cast from foot to groin encased his entire left leg, and a sling held his left arm immobile. Surgical wounds to his pelvis and the left upper side of his abdomen caused him agony every time he so much as took a breath.

But luck had smiled on him even though he didn't see it that way. He had no neck or spinal injuries. He would walk again, eventually.

He dealt with this near-death experience using the tried and tested technique of denial. He didn't discuss his feelings with nurses or friends. He refused to look at his face in the mirror. Instead he announced he was going home. He continued this campaign for a week in the high-dependency unit as he struggled through his first rounds of light physical therapy until his doctor reluctantly agreed to his discharge, provided Matt hired a nurse to look after him at home. He found the idea distasteful, but knew he had no choice. He didn't like relying on others. He hated asking for 8

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help, and felt frustrated and useless.

The gym downstairs in his basement wouldn't be seeing him for a while. He imagined the muscles of his powerful physique turning to flab, and he felt ugly and unattractive. And what about his face? He had once been extraordinarily handsome. He knew that from the way he attracted attention wherever he went. Now people would stare at him in the street for all the wrong reasons. He lay in bed in the hospital and touched his cheek, tracing the ridged scar from ear to mouth and wondered if anyone would ever see past it.

\* \* \* \*

Flowers and cards filled his house when he got home. An electric bed stood in place of his lovely four-poster. He regarded it in distaste and dismay. Then he noticed all the mirrors had been removed from his room as per his instructions, and his heart became heavy as lead with self-pity.

The nurse he had hired greeted him. A buxom blonde, surely barely out of nursing school, she seemed more qualified at leaning over him and showing her cleavage rather than attending to his nursing needs, or 9

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administering regular analgesia. After two days, Matt let her go. It troubled him that despite her attractiveness, he never once got an erection at her attentiveness. He had already been warned at the hospital that nerve damage from his fractured pelvis could lead to impotence. He should have been grateful at still being continent, although he didn't *feel* grateful; he felt robbed, with no guarantees from his doctor that sensation would return. He tried not to dwell on this issue. He didn't need his equipment in working order at the current time. But this was no good. What if he could never have sex again?

The next nurse mothered Matt in a way he never had been before. Kind and competent enough, she made him feel a little child-like, a little submissive. He felt emasculated enough, lying helplessly in bed, without being made to feel completely dependent. He asked her to leave after a week.

He thought about the type of nurse he should specify when he phoned a different agency. The solution struck him. A man. But then a male nurse spelt only one thing for Matt: gay. A little on the homophobic side and well aware of his superb body, he wasn't sure he wanted some queer getting his rocks off at having to look after Matt intimately. Specifying a straight guy to the agency 10

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could hardly be seen as politically correct though.

In the end he just asked the agency to send him a man, and predictably didn't have the choice of who as they only had one on their books. He agreed to this nurse coming the next day for an interview.

The nurse arrived promptly at nine the next morning. Severine, his housekeeper, had already brought Matt his breakfast, and he lay wincing at the pain in his pelvis and ribs as he tried to get comfortable against his pillows. The door opened.

"Mr. Hayden to see you," Severine said.

The nurse entered Matt's bedroom. He was perhaps in his early thirties and smaller than Matt, a shade under six feet. He had a lean, well-proportioned body and wore a black shirt and black trousers, smart in appearance. Matt had to

grudgingly admit the nurse was attractive, startlingly so; his features regular and even, his mouth pink and full, and his hair jet black and spiky. He was way too well-groomed for a guy though. If he wasn't gay, Matt would eat his hat.

He approached Matt's bed, and Matt tensed as he always did when he met someone new since the accident.

He waited for that inevitable flicker of the gaze onto the scar before the person quickly tried to pretend they hadn't 11

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noticed and looked him too firmly in the eye. Matt always reacted with a stony glare which told the person they were a shallow idiot. He watched the nurse like a hawk as he drew closer, and he waited to despise him as much as he despised everyone else.

"Hi," the nurse greeted him, hand out, gaze on his, not straying from his eyes. "James Hayden." He smiled, his teeth perfect. Aquamarine eyes, like pale, glassy seawater, surrounded by thick lashes appraised Matt. The nurse seemed at ease. He didn't seem uncomfortable like Matt was a deformed freak. Matt felt both confused and grateful.

"Matt Harmon," he replied, taking James' hand.

"Take a seat." He indicated the chair close to his bed and James did so. "Can I get you a drink?"

James shook his head. "Your... girlfriend already asked me. She's bringing me one."

Matt laughed for what might have been the first time since his accident. "That's my housekeeper. She's forty-nine and married with four children."

James flushed a little and grinned. "Well, you never know..."

Matt smiled. "So. You realise this is a live-in position for the duration of my recovery?"

"Yeah."

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"Five days on, two days off."

"Who looks after you on my two days off?"

"My friends. I don't need you twenty-four seven."

James eyed the long-leg cast, the sling, the bruising all over Matt's bare torso and the newly-undressed surgical wounds. "Don't you?" he asked sceptically.

Matt lifted an eyebrow. "You're offering to work seven days a week?"

James shrugged. "Why don't we just see how it goes? I'll assess your needs."

Matt regarded him. His needs were far more than James could provide. Like a fucking shrink, although that was something he'd never admit to anyone. He nodded.

"I'd say your immediate needs are adjusting those pillows behind you," James added and stood up.

In relief, Matt leaned forward awkwardly, wincing in pain. His shoulder brushed James' as he reached behind him. Matt got a whiff of expensive cologne, some brand that he owned himself. He felt the warmth and muscle of the man's body, and he sank back quickly as James moved away.

Even his friends didn't hug him when they came to visit because it hurt him too much. They had all always been touchy-feely, and it made him feel awkward. He hated 13

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being touched, had always hated it, except during the act of sex; and even then, he kept kisses and caresses to a minimum and tried to get to the business in hand as quickly as the woman would allow him. Something in the back of his mind sometimes told him this was a little abnormal, and he had never felt this more acutely than when he had been in the hospital. When his nurses had leaned over him, when he had smelled their fresh, feminine scent and felt the warmth of their bodies, it had left him a little desperate for... something. He wasn't sure what. He felt the same when James leaned over him. It made him angry that the accident, the altered body image and the enforced dependence on others had appeared to leave him not just physically weak, but emotionally weak too; and he vowed that no one would see this weakness displayed.

"Are you okay?" James moved back to his chair.

"Did I hurt you?"

Matt shook his head. "I'm fine. When do you want to start, James?" His question surprised even himself. He hadn't given James any sort of real interview before hiring him. He was simply too tired to care anymore. If James didn't work out, he would fire him like he had done the two nurses before him and just get another.

James smiled, which lit up his handsome face and 14

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almost made Matt smile in return. Almost, but not quite.

James had already made him laugh once, that was more than enough for one day. "Let me go back for my things, and then I'm all yours. Do you want me to wear a uniform?"

"No. Unless you want to. I'd rather not be reminded I'm sick."

"So you're okay with jeans?"

"Sure. Whatever you want. Unless it's a tutu."

He regretted the quip when James narrowed his eyes a little, not looking amused. He may as well have called James queer to his face, curse it. James murmured a goodbye, turned, and left the room.

Matt stared from the window. He couldn't help suspecting that James had got the measure of him from one meeting— a reclusive, cold, unemotional man. A front to hide his desperate need for help.

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## Chapter Two

James wore a T-shirt and jeans on his return, his biceps well-toned and his hips slender. Matt instructed him to pull a chair up to his bed so they could thrash out the finer points of his employment. James did so, bringing the bundle of Matt's nursing notes with him. "So," he remarked, flicking through the paperwork. "You've had two nurses before me?" Matt nodded. He still cringed at his tutu joke. "Why's that? Are you so difficult to manage?"

"You better believe it." Matt blushed. He coughed, averting his eyes. "It's not that," he muttered. "They were both women, they weren't..."

"You needed a man?"

Matt met his steady gaze again. James' question seemed innocent enough even though this line of questioning deeply embarrassed Matt. "Well... they weren't strong enough to help me mobilise and... between you and me, a woman helping me to the bathroom and stuff, I found it... difficult, you know?"

"I know. I understand your problem."

Matt almost sighed with relief. James took out his cell. "I'll take your doctor's number and give him a call later." He copied the number off the front of the 16

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documents. Then he bent his head back to the notes and glanced through Matt's prescription sheet and the plan of care from his doctor. Matt studied the long sweep of his lashes against his cheeks and waited for him to speak.

James looked up finally. "So, have you been up out of bed yet without any help?"

Matt shook his head.

"Then how are you going to manage on my days off?" Pale blue-green eyes



watched him unblinkingly.

"I told you. My friends will help me."

"And how often will they come?"

"As often as I want them to. They're coming tomorrow, so you can take most of the day off, just give me my meds morning and night, then..." He trailed off. He sounded ridiculous in his need to stress his independence.

"Okay. Let's just play this by ear for now, until I see you mobilise. I don't mind being available when you need me. It's not a big deal. And the bedroom you gave me, it's bigger than my entire house." James grinned endearingly.

Of course Matt had given James the best guest room, with cable and a DVD player, a king-sized bed and a Jacuzzi in the ensuite. Hell, it even had a bidet.

"I've got to ask though, despite this amazing house, you're kind of isolated up here. Don't you get lonely?"

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Matt stared at him, his face heating. He shook his head emphatically. "I like to be alone." Wasn't *that* the truth? He didn't even bring girls he picked up in bars back here. Nobody got to see this amazing house but his three close friends.

James stood up. "Right then. Want to get washed and shaved?"

Matt nodded. "There's a bowl in the bathroom."

James went into the ensuite. He came back with the bowl and put it on the table, wheeling it into position across the bed. Then he returned with soap, flannel, towel, cologne and deodorant, plus a separate cup of water and Matt's toothbrush and toothpaste. Matt reached across to the bedside table for his electric razor. He had never used one of these before his accident, but had gotten used to it, seeing as he didn't want to use a mirror. He knew from touch that he usually missed

clumps of whiskers around his scar and probably looked a mess. Maybe he would get the nerve to ask James to shave him properly. Either that or ask for a mirror finally.

"What clothes do you want?"

Matt pointed to the end door of the wardrobe. James opened it to the neatly folded items on shelves within.

"Shorts and T-shirt. And boxers."

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James brought the clothes to the bed. "Do you need my help?" Matt shook his head. "Want me to leave?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'll go and unpack, be back later."

Matt nodded. James closed the door, and Matt slid free of his sling and brought the soapy flannel up to his chest and shoulders and under-arms, wishing for the thousandth time that he could take a shower.

\* \* \* \*

Clean and shaved and somehow dressed and in a great deal of pain, Matt lay sweaty and exhausted in bed, thinking that he now needed another wash after all his exertions. What he needed more was to pee. He hadn't gone yet that morning, having been too embarrassed to ask his housekeeper to pass him one of the disposable urine bottles from a box near the bed. Of course it was ridiculous, but it wasn't what he employed Severine to do. What would he have done with it after? Handed it back to his housekeeper full of piss to dispose of? He didn't think so. His bladder ached with discomfort. He doubted James would hear him in the vast house if he called out.

Perhaps he could reach the box. Matt only had to 19

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stand up against the side of the bed and lean across. He didn't even need his crutches, which were propped against the nightstand. Withdrawing his left arm from its sling, he pushed the table away from the bed and threw the covers back.

Moving his good leg over to the edge, Matt grabbed his casted leg and lifted it, dragging it with him as he moved. The bed was way too high. He reached for the remote and lowered it somewhat, but not too low, seeing as he was tall with long legs. Then he took hold of his leg again, twisted his body and slithered slowly over the edge of the bed. The pain in his left arm made every movement almost unbearable. As his right foot slid to the floor a little too fast, he overbalanced and let go of his cast so his left foot crashed to the floor, sending reverberations up his broken leg. Matt howled.

Footsteps came along the landing, and an urgent knock sounded at the door. "Matt? Can I come in?"

Matt, teeth clenched tightly together, eyes squeezed shut, could not reply, so James let himself in anyway.

"What are you doing?" James asked him in dismay as he hurried across the room.

"I need to pee."

James took him by the shoulders and supported him 20

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against the bed, body pressed to his. Matt recoiled in distaste at being handled this way.

James clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "Why didn't you ask me?"

"Because I can piss without your help," Matt growled defensively. "Please, can you just pass me a goddamn bottle before I wet my pants?"

James bristled a little at being spoken to this way, but Matt could think of nothing but his screaming bladder.

James let go of him and reached down for a bottle. "Here.

Can you keep your balance while you use it?"

"No. I need you to hold my dick for me."

Abruptly, James turned and left the room, slamming the door.

Matt sighed, took himself out and started to pee with relief. *What an asshole I am, a goddamned asshole.*

He'd already shown James how difficult he could be. He would have to pay him more than he first thought just to keep him sweet.

He stood holding the bottle when he had finished.

"I'm done," he called.

James entered the room quickly, took the bottle from him and disposed of it in the bathroom. That efficient nurse's expression sat in place, the one that Matt had dealt 21

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with way too often when being difficult at the hospital.

James came back and took the bed's remote. He lowered it further and pushed Matt back a little by the upper arms so his backside made contact with the bed.

"I'll lift this, you lift your other." James bent down and grabbed the cast.

Matt wriggled onto the bed with difficulty, shuffling into the middle as James supported his leg all the way and placed a pillow beneath his ankle.

Matt sank back against his pillow, trembling a little in pain, his forehead wet with sweat. Every inch of his body cried out in agony. For a moment, he longed to vocalise this inner suffering, to cry and shout. But Matt didn't cry. The last time had been when his cat had died when he was twelve. Instead, he bit his lip hard and took some deep breaths, willing himself outside his body and imagining lying on a beach many miles from here.

"Here." James' voice brought him back to his miserable reality. "Wash your hands."

Matt dipped his hands into the bowl of water on the table then reached for the towel which still lay draped over the bed. James pushed the table away and pulled the covers up. "I guess you'll be requiring some pain relief now."

Matt nodded.

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James surveyed the table in the corner which held all the paraphernalia Matt needed, including his drugs. He glanced at the drug chart, then over at Matt. "This continuing morphine prescription is something I need to discuss with your doctor. It's got to stop."

Matt didn't reply. Morphine was the only thing he looked forward to these days. He watched his nurse draw up water in a syringe before mixing it with some of the liquid heaven and placing it in a tray, along with some other equipment, and bringing it to the bed. He sat down on its edge.

"I noticed from your nursing notes that your cannula's been in three days." James produced a tourniquet from his pocket. "I'll have to re-site it before I give you your pain relief."

Matt groaned. "I feel like a fucking pin-cushion."

Excuse my language."

"I know. Sorry. If it's any consolation, I'm very good at this."

He peeled the dressing off the existing cannula in Matt's right inner elbow and removed it swiftly, then held a swab against the site for a few seconds until it stopped bleeding. Next he snapped the elastic shut around his upper arm and pulled it taut. Matt almost laughed when he 23

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noticed the tourniquet sported little bats with vampire teeth.

James took hold of Matt's arm close to the elbow and pulled it straight, looking on its inner side for veins.

Slowly, he began to trace the skin with his fingertips, pressing a little here and there with his index finger. Matt turned his head away at this touch, at how it was way too much like a caress on his needy skin.

James' fingers trailed down to Matt's hand and he held it in both of his, looking first at the side of the wrist, then turning it over to examine the back. He pressed again, stroking the skin, making Matt long to snatch his hand away. "Is it okay if I put it here?"

Matt's gaze moved back to the prominent vein James had lightly traced with his fingertip. "It hurts a bit more here, but I don't want to put it in the crook of your elbow again. It's been done to death there."

Matt averted his eyes again. "Just do it, and give me the morphine, okay?" Christ, he sounded like a junkie.

James unsnapped the tourniquet and moved it down to Matt's forearm before pulling it tight. A cold swab touched his hand, and the smell of alcohol filled his nostrils. He felt the tip of a needle against his skin as James inserted the cannula with way more gentleness than anyone had ever done before. Or perhaps Matt's body had no more 24

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capacity to feel pain.

"Okay." James applied a clear dressing and then unsnapped the tourniquet so the feeling came back to Matt's arm. "Do you usually feel sick with this? Because you're written up for an anti-emetic if you need one."

Matt shook his head. "I'll be okay."

"All right. Here it is."

Matt, face still turned away, closed his eyes as the chemical bliss swarmed into his veins, locking onto opiate receptors and driving the pain out almost instantly. He knew only too well why people got addicted to this stuff.

James paused with his syringe still attached to the cannula. "Has the pain gone? I don't want to give you so much."

Matt opened his eyes a little hazily and nodded.

"Thank you, James."

James withdrew the syringe. He flushed the drug through the cannula with some saline then moved away.

"I'm going to start making up your antibiotics now."

*Whatever*, Matt thought, because everything was all right now.

While he sank towards sleep, he felt James attach the IV drip to his cannula. Instead of opening his eyes, he forced himself further and further down into oblivion, 25

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willing himself away from the broken, needy man on the bed.

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## Chapter Three

When he awoke, the room was in semi-darkness, lit only by his bedside lamp. In the chair by his bed, James sat busily writing notes. He looked up as Matt shifted position, his hand seeking the remote to his bed.

It had fallen on the floor. James retrieved it and pressed it into his hand. Matt mumbled thanks and lifted the back of the bed to a sitting position. He glanced at the clock by the bed. Eight p.m. He groaned. "Shit. I shouldn't have slept so long. I'll be awake all night now."

James' voice was sympathetic. "Well, extreme movie week starts tonight on the Horror Channel."

"You're a horror movie fan?"

"Sure."

"Me too."

"Great. I might watch a couple myself tonight before I turn in."

"Are you tired?"

"Yeah." James closed the folder.

"Have I been hard work?" Matt asked quietly.

James shrugged. "I've had worse."

"Have you?"

"Yeah."

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Matt said nothing. He couldn't bring himself to apologise, even though he knew it was warranted.

"So," James said, breaking the silence. "Your housekeeper's just making your dinner; it should be along any minute."

"Have you had yours?"

"Yeah. She's a very good cook, your lady. I'm going to be eating better at your house than I ever have at my own." He smiled.

Matt returned it half-heartedly. He wondered briefly if James had someone to put his meals on the table for him; someone who would miss him for the duration of his stay at Matt's. "Yeah, she's great. Fussess too much though."

"She cares, that's all. That's not a crime."

Their gazes held. Matt felt like James knew everything inside him at that moment. How emotionally repressed he was. How afraid of touch, how needy and despairing. How he couldn't even *think* about being trapped in that car.

"Matt..." Something in James' tone made Matt tense. "Where are your parents?"

Matt lowered his gaze. "Dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Empathy softened James'

voice. "How did they die?"

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"Plane crash when I was three."

James sighed. "Who did you grow up with?"

"Foster parents."

"Where are they?"

"San Francisco."

"They *do* know about your accident, right?" James clearly already knew the answer.

Matt shook his head tightly, biting his lip, still not making eye-contact. His foster parents had been keen to get rid of him as soon as he could stand on his own two feet.

He never bothered seeing them now. He felt no bond with them. They had always been more interested in their careers than him, and usually threw money at him to assuage their consciences over their neglect of him. He had always vowed if he ever had a child, which he doubted, he would not be the kind of parent they had been to him.

"Why not? Matt, you nearly died. You need your parents here."

"They're not my parents!" Matt snarled furiously.

"All right but..."

"But nothing. They never loved me. As far as I'm concerned, they don't care if I'm

alive or dead."

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"Matt..." James reached out, and horrified, Matt moved quickly away from the attempted touch.

"Don't ever mention them again, have you got me?"

He was wound up to a fury, his heart pounding, his face flushed.

"All right. Just calm down." His voice low and soothing, James rose from the chair and stood close by Matt's bed.

They stared at each other a moment, Matt breathing hard. He'd just given James an unpleasant taste of the anger management issues he'd battled all his life to control.

A brief knock sounded at the door before Severine appeared with her usual extravaganza on a tray. "Matthew,"

she cooed, always using his full name. "Just wait until you taste this." She wheeled the table to the bed and set the tray on it. Matt's eyes roamed to the chocolate concoction in the bowl at its edge.

"No dessert, Severine," he said quietly. "I already told you."

"But it's your favourite. James loved it earlier."

"And James isn't bed-bound and getting fat. Take it away."

She gave a little hurt huff, plucked the bowl from the tray and left the room.

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"Don't look at me like that," Matt admonished James.

"Like what? I'll leave you to your dinner. I'll be back later for your last meds, okay?"

Matt nodded curtly and picked up his fork as James closed the door behind him. He should have known the subject of his parents would come up sooner or later. After all, the nursing staff had given him the third degree in hospital too, trying to get permission to call Matt's foster parents until he had offended them with his furious refusals. He sighed. Deep down, something in him wanted them called,



wanted to give them another chance to love him now he needed it most, but his pride wouldn't allow it.

They'd had their chance to love him and had never taken it.

As such, it had shaped him into this cold, aloof man. A thought flashed through his mind. *I despise myself.*

He pushed his table away and turned his face into the pillow.

\* \* \* \*

James returned at eleven o'clock. "You watching *I Spit on Your Grave* then?" he questioned with a slight smile as he perused Matt's prescription chart. "I came during the 31

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commercials so you wouldn't miss any."

"Yeah, I've never seen it before." Tense and anxious, Matt expected James to bring up the subject of his foster parents again.

James stared at him in mock-horror. "Oh my God.

Are you serious? Call yourself a horror movie fan?"

Matt smiled hesitantly, grateful James seemed to be letting their previous conversation slide. Maybe he was just biding his time and working out a different tactic. "Yeah, yeah. I'm not so sure I'm into watching women getting gang-raped."

"She gets her own back, don't worry about that."

"I can only imagine."

"You really can't." James smirked. "Watch out for the bathtub scene." He came over with Matt's night-time medication in a pot and poured a glass of water from the jug on the table. Matt swallowed obediently, and James signed the

prescription chart. "Goodnight. Call me if you need anything during the night. I'm a light sleeper."

The film was just re-starting. "Goodnight." Matt fought with himself a moment. "James?"

James turned back, one eyebrow raised questioningly.

"I'm sorry. For..." He hesitated. He never 32

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apologised for anything to anyone. "Earlier. For..." He couldn't mention the conversation about his parents again.

He couldn't bring himself to broach the subject, because the way he felt right now, if James took him back there to this most painful subject, Matt would break down like a child.

"For... saying you needed to hold my dick."

James shrugged. "I *have* had to do that before. No fun. Glad you didn't need me to do that for you."

Matt reddened. James slipped out of the door, and Matt slid down a little into his pillows, staring blindly at the television.

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## Chapter Four

James entered his room just after Severine brought Matt's breakfast and immediately came over to adjust Matt's pillows as he sat up to eat. "How did you like *I Spit on Your Grave*?" James had that just-showered scent about him as he leaned over Matt, his hair a little damp. Matt inhaled the smell deeply, and his eyes almost slipped shut.

"The bathtub scene was interesting."

"As a man, I thought you would have found that scene distasteful," James remarked, moving back.

"Absolutely not. He deserved it."

"I agree."

"Have you eaten?"

"I ate with Severine in the kitchen."

"My friends are coming soon, so you don't have to be here all day."

"Okay. I'll sort your meds, help you with a wash and then I'll be off."

Matt turned his attention to his breakfast while James retreated to the corner and started to open packages and bottles. Matt glanced over, regarding his broad shoulders a moment. James wore a black Guns N' Roses T-shirt and tight jeans. The outfit really emphasised what 34

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great shape he was in. Matt grabbed the remote from under the pillow next to him and flicked the TV on to mask the silence, turning it to a rock music channel before he cleared his throat. After yesterday, he felt he had to make some effort.

"Ever see Guns N' Roses?" he asked.

"Yeah I saw them in '91 in San Francisco," James replied over his shoulder.

"Lucky bastard," Matt said. "I never saw them.

What else do you like to do when you're not nursing crippled rich men?"

James turned around, his expression gently reproving. "I like fast cars."

Matt tensed all over. He turned his gaze to the window. "Yeah, I once liked them too."

James sighed. "I'm sorry."

Matt shook his head. "You don't have to be sorry for liking fast cars just because my inability to drive one properly almost got me killed. What car would you have if money were no object?"

"A Ferrari."

"Nice choice. Hardly practical for grocery shopping, though."

"No, but then I don't do a lot of grocery shopping."

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"No? I guess your wife does all that then?" Matt kept his tone light but his gaze searched James' eyes and the answer became suddenly all important to him.

A smile crossed James' face. He turned back to the task of Matt's medication. "I don't have a wife. I shop online."

Matt realised he had been holding his breath. He breathed out with relief.

"You know, I've not asked you what you do for a living yet, Matt. It must be something good, judging by this house."

"I wouldn't say good. I've got an internet book business. I like it."

"And who's looking after it now?"

"My assistant manager Nick. He knows what he's doing."

"That must be a relief to you."

"Yeah." Matt drank some coffee and pushed his half-eaten cereal aside.

James came over with a syringe lying in a plastic tray. "Aren't you hungry?"

Matt shook his head. He lay looking out of the window. Spring was in full bloom outside, and the wind blew scatterings of cherry blossom bloom relentlessly 36

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against the glass. It was a sunny day, the bright sky filled with large clouds which held the promise of rain later.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

After a silence, James spoke again. "I can take you out if you want to go."

Matt glanced at him in surprise. "I can't even get to the john without help. What are you going to do, carry me over your shoulder?"

Their gazes held unwaveringly. "I'm stronger than I look."

"I'm sure," Matt muttered, turning back to the window.

The edge of the mattress dipped when James sat down on it, and a moment later a latex-covered hand touched Matt's, taking his wrist and bringing the hand out

straight to lie on the covers. Matt didn't look. Fingers touched him again, curling around and beneath his palm, keeping his hand steady while James injected the drug into Matt's vein. Matt tensed at what he regarded as such an intimate touch. He didn't understand how it was so easy for his nurse to sit touching the hand of a perfect stranger this 37

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way. Just for a moment, he envied James and his easy-going manner, a man who was comfortable in his own skin and didn't have the same issues Matt did regarding touch. A man who was as attractive as Matt had once been.

James took his time giving the antibiotic. Slowly, Matt had the shameful but irresistible urge to close his own hand around James'. His fingers twitched in his nurse's grip.

He wanted it. He wanted to touch another human being. He wasn't sure how long it had been since he had.

He felt the syringe being twisted loose, another taking its place, the quick flush of saline into his vein and knew he had missed the opportunity.

James let go of his hand and stood up. Matt continued to look out of the window, his pulse running far too fast. He hoped and prayed James wouldn't feel the need to take his observations at that moment, because he imagined his blood pressure would be sky high too.

"I spoke to your doctor this morning. I'm meeting with him this afternoon to review your plan of care."

"Whatever he says about me, he's a liar," Matt replied dryly.

"Is he going to tell me you're difficult and head-strong?"

"He might."



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James laughed a little. "I already know that, so it wouldn't be news."

"I'm not as much of an asshole as you think I am,"

Matt muttered, unsure why he felt the need to defend himself.

"I know that. I know how people work, and I know why you're behaving the way you do. What's more, I understand."

Matt's gaze moved to his, his face heating a little.

He shook his head. "No you don't, you couldn't possibly.

You nurses, that's your standard phrase isn't it? You always say you understand, but if you haven't nearly *died* and you're not scarred for *life*, then you *don't* fucking understand, okay?"

James looked a little chastened. "Okay then, Matt,"

he said softly. "I don't understand. Forgive me." He turned away.

Matt looked after him, his anger far from sated. He had been expecting a fight, a war of words, maybe some cathartic shouting of how he really *did* feel, which might have done him a world of good, and now James had surprisingly backed down. Confusion and frustration warred within him. He curled his good hand into a fist and closed his eyes, taking some deep breaths.

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"Want to talk to me?" James asked quietly.

Matt kept his eyes closed. He shook his head, biting his lip hard. For one terrible moment he thought he was going to cry, but the impulse passed. "Can you help

me to the bathroom now, please?" He took his left arm from its sling.

"Sure." James moved around to the opposite side of the bed, while Matt slid over. James took the remote and lowered the bed slightly, then gripped Matt's casted leg and helped to swing it over the edge.

As Matt lowered himself to the ground on his good leg, James stood way too close to him, almost pinning him back against the bed. Matt longed to tell the nurse to get out of his personal space.

James held the crutches while Matt slid his arms into them, skin rubbing against skin as he did so. The discomfort he felt again from this contact differed from what he'd experienced when being attended by the first female nurse. It wasn't like it made him hot like she had, far from it. But in equal measures he longed to both push James away and have further contact with him. His thoughts alarmed and perturbed him.

He looked up as he got his arms in his crutches ready to move, and his eyes met James'.

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"Okay?" James asked softly, his eyes like tropical seas in the morning sunlight coming through the windows.

Matt nodded. For a moment neither man moved, just kept their gaze fixed on the other.

Then Matt dipped his head, vague embarrassment swarming through him, and put his crutches forward. James moved out of the way, but stayed by Matt's side as he walked torturously towards the ensuite, every step painful.

Once inside, Matt eyed his double shower and Jacuzzi with barely concealed longing. A sigh came from deep down inside him. He stopped at the sink and propped his crutches against the wall, looking at the empty space where the mirror had been. "I can take it from here."

"You did really well then, Matt."

Matt felt a little patronised at this, as though he was some sort of child. He didn't need praise from his nurse for walking to the goddamn bathroom. "Shut the door on your way out," he muttered, eyes averted.

\* \* \* \*

Later, his friends arrived. Lewis had been his best friend since school. Dark-haired and blue-eyed with boyish good looks, he worked as a lawyer in L.A. for a six-figure 41

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sum and bitched about it the entire time, always telling Matt he was going to quit one day and run away to a desert island.

Nick, Matt's lean, attractive assistant manager had worked for him for three years, and after being introduced to Lewis, had become firm friends with him. They were joined at the hip. Only recently Matt had begun to observe the undisguised affection between the two and wondered if it meant something more. He had no evidence for this, and the thought made him uncomfortable. He knew both men were straight; he had witnessed their many conquests himself first hand, so he often felt ashamed to be thinking this way about them. Nonetheless, the thought continued to plague him.

His other school friend, Joel, owned a restaurant in Long Beach. An eccentric dresser, controversial and big-mouthed, he told it like it was and had got Matt into more fights than he could remember.

"So," Joel said, throwing himself into a chair in the corner. "What's your new nurse like? As hot as the first?"

"Er... he's a guy," Matt replied, embarrassed.

"Oh right. Gay then? I never thought you of all people would have a fag bed-bathing you."

"Joel," Lewis said in a low, warning tone when he 42

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saw Matt's face.

"What?" Joel asked; just as Matt saw a movement in the doorway. James stood there. Matt felt his face flush from the neck upwards as their eyes met. "All I'm saying is..."

"Shut the fuck up," Matt muttered, silencing his friend immediately.

All eyes swung to the door.

"Hey." Lewis broke the silence. "You must be Matt's nurse. Nice to meet you." He strode forward and took James' hand. "I'm Lewis, this is Nick and that prick there is Joel."

Nick greeted him as James introduced himself. Joel merely slid lower in his chair, mumbling something. James'

gaze met Matt's. He looked oddly amused at Matt's embarrassment. "I just came to leave you my cell number.

In case you need me."

Matt reached over to his bedside table, fumbling for his cell.

"I got it. Want me to put it in the address book for you?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

James typed the number in and put the phone back.

"See you later. He glanced around the room, gaze lingering 43

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hard on Joel. "Nice to meet you guys."

Deadly silence reigned when he had gone. "You're a fucking asshole Joel," Matt said.

Joel agreed, his head lowered.

"He *is* a male nurse though," Nick remarked with a smirk. "So he *is* probably gay." Matt glared at him.

"Shush," Lewis told Nick. He moved to a chair, and Nick perched on its arm. His hand, on his thigh, almost touched Lewis'.

Joel coughed to break the uncomfortable silence.

"We brought you some stuff." He unzipped the rucksack he'd brought. "Magazines, books, protein drinks..."

Matt scowled at the reminder that he wouldn't be working out while drinking these protein shakes. "Candy bars..."

Matt scowled further. "Thanks," he muttered ungratefully.

"And DVDs." Joel produced a stack with a flourish.

Matt held his hand out for them. They were some recent horror films, which perked Matt up considerably.

He smiled at Joel. "Thanks dude."

"So." Joel rubbed his hands before pulling a pack of cards out of his pocket. "I've had a good week and I'm feeling lucky. Who's in?"

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Everyone groaned. Joel was hardly a legendary poker player; Nick and Matt were much better. Lewis was poor but often had sneaky help from Nick, which

Matt usually turned a blind eye to. The three men moved their seats up to Matt's bed, and Joel dealt the cards onto his table. Matt looked around at his friends and hoped they wouldn't be leaving any time soon.

James returned about an hour after Matt's friends had left. Severine had been in to tidy up the remains of take-away and beer bottles. Bizarrely, Lewis had gone away with a huge cheque, Joel with a smaller one. Matt had won the glorious sum of fifty dollars.

James knocked on Matt's door and entered with a brief 'hello' before going to mix up some antibiotics. "Are you drunk?" he asked casually over his shoulder.

"Not really. Are you mad at me for drinking?"

James frowned. "Of course not. What you do in your own time isn't my business. There are no drugs you're taking which shouldn't be mixed with alcohol."

An awkward silence followed.

"Look, about this morning..."

James shook his head. "Don't worry. You can't control what comes out of your friend's mouth. I don't think he can either."

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Matt smiled in relieved amusement.

"Want to ask me?"

"What?"

"Want to ask me if I'm gay? If it bothers you."

Matt flushed in discomfort. "It doesn't," he lied.

"You're my nurse. I don't have a right to..."

"Sure you do, and I see you thinking it. So, do you want to ask me or not?"

James' calmness bothered him. Matt sighed. Just what was he going to do if James said yes? He couldn't fire him; he would be in court immediately. "Okay," he said finally. "Are you?"

James looked at him a moment before replying.

"No, Matt. Being a male nurse doesn't make me gay."

Matt reddened even further. He averted his eyes.

"Okay. I'm sorry. It's none of my business. I don't know what I was thinking..." He searched for some further topic of conversation. "So, do you have a girl?"

James shook his head. "Do you?"

"No."

James looked surprised. "Why not? A rich guy like you, built the way you are..."

"Are you teasing me?"

"No. I just thought..."

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"What? Think someone's going to throw me a pity fuck now with my face looking like this?"

James looked shocked. He blushed. Deep regret came over his face. "Matt," he said, his voice low.

Matt turned his head away. "Don't."

"Listen to me."

"I don't want to listen to you. You're not my fucking shrink. Do what you have to do and then go. *Please.*" His jaw pulsed as he clenched it hard. Ten years ago he would have broken something; usually someone's face. Now he controlled his anger and frustration, his good fist clutching at the bedcovers.

James stayed silent. He hung a bag on the IV stand, connecting the line to Matt's arm, and then he hovered a moment before he spoke. "It's okay. Your face. It's nothing.

Believe me when I say that. It's nothing at all."

Matt kept his face turned away, his eyes closed. He knew if he opened them tears would spill down his face.

"Go away," he repeated, his voice unsteady.

James sighed. "I'm sorry if I hurt you, Matt. It wasn't my intention. Goodnight." He closed the door quietly behind him. Matt reached over to the bedside lamp and plunged the room into darkness. He laid awake the rest of the night.

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# Chapter Five

Exhausted, Matt lay lethargically propped against his pillows after breakfast the next morning, watching the news with glassy eyes when James came in. His nurse gave him a cursory greeting and then bent over his drug prescription chart. James was pissed at him, as well he might be. Matt felt too miserable to attempt to apologise.

Nonetheless, as the silence went on, he searched for topics of conversation. Finally he took the plunge.

"What's your favourite horror movie, James?"

James turned around. He seemed relieved Matt had made the first move. "Something else you won't have seen," he said with a sarcastic lift of the eyebrow.

"Are you dissing my knowledge of the macabre?"

Matt shot back in mock outrage.

"Totally. You need educating."

"And you're the one to do it, are you?"

"Yeah."

Sparring with James could be fun after all. "Okay then, you better go to yours and bring me all your obscure, weird films."

James smiled. "Right."

"So what is it?" Matt watched James draw up the 49

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liquid from a vial.

"What?"

"Your favourite horror film?"

" *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.*"

Matt frowned. "Wasn't that made like a hundred years ago?"

"No." James pretended to be insulted. "Nineteen nineteen actually."

Matt laughed. "You're so funny."

"Bet you've never seen it." James injected the contents of his syringe into a bag of saline.

"No."

"Then why am I funny?"

"Okay, I surrender." Matt held his good hand up. "I won't laugh at you until I've seen it."

James nodded in satisfaction and brought the bag over to the bed, unwrapping a giving set and hanging the bag on the IV stand.

"Can I watch it tonight?"

"Sure. What's yours, Matt?" He connected the giving set to the bag and squeezed the chamber. Matt's gaze followed the slow tracking of fluid along the line.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "I'm not even sure. I love *The Omen* though..."

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"Original or remake?" James demanded quick as a flash.

"Please," Matt said in disgust. "Original of course."

James smirked. "Go on, what else?"

" *Psycho*. Don't even insult me by asking me original or remake," he added quickly. James chuckled.

"And *The Blair Witch Project*."

James leaned over Matt and attached the IV line to his cannula. "I'll admit to being a little scared when I saw that." He pulled off his gloves and discarded them. "So what plans do you have for tonight, Matt?"

Matt started to glare until he realised James wasn't mocking him. "Well, you know, thought I'd take in a movie downtown, then go to a swanky restaurant, follow that up with way too many drinks at a club, then bring a chick home and bang her in my ultra-sexy hospital bed until dawn."

James smiled, a slight blush staining his cheeks.

"Okay. If you change your mind, we could have a horror movie night."

Matt hid his surprise. "Yeah, we could. I'll see how I feel; it's a tough call to make."

James returned to the table to tidy up. "Shall I bring you some water for a wash?"

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"Yeah. Thanks."

\* \* \* \*

For some reason, Matt looked forward all day to having some company that

evening. His physical therapist

—a huge man named Will— put him through arduous exercises which seemed to go on forever. Will took no prisoners. He didn't give a damn what Matt thought; his only goal being to build his muscles back up and get him back to some semblance of independence.

Just after Severine had taken away Matt's dinner tray, James appeared. "Hey." He held a stack of DVDs and something in a brown paper bag.

Matt sat up a little straighter and eyed the bag curiously. James pulled out a six pack of beer with a flourish. Matt looked at it in surprise and with more than a hint of longing.

"As your nurse, I prescribe this for you. You haven't had morphine today, so there's no reason you can't have a drink."

Matt smirked. "Frankly I might need a drink to get through some of your films."

James glowered good-naturedly at him, put the 52

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beers on the side and then perched on the edge of the bed, offering the DVDs to Matt. "Choose the first one."

"Guess we better get it over with." Matt held out *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure."

James produced a bottle-opener from his pocket, opened two beers, and offered one to Matt. "Cheers."

"Cheers."

James put the disc into the DVD player while Matt took a long, satisfying drink of beer before reaching for the remote and starting the movie.

James drew a chair up to the bed and slouched comfortably in it. As the opening credits started, he said,

"Mind if I turn the light off?"

Matt glanced sideways at him and shrugged.

"It's better with the lights off." James reached for the switch on the bedside lamp and plunged the room into near-darkness.

"I'll bet," Matt said dryly. He turned his attention back to the TV. After a few minutes of silence as the film opened on a young man sitting on a bench next to an older man with crazed eyes, Matt started to wonder if James could see from his position. After all, the plasma screen 53

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was mounted on the wall at an angle to the bed, giving a perfect view from there, but not from the rest of the room.

He turned his head to James. "Can you see?"

"I'm okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It's not like I haven't seen this movie a hundred times."

"So you mean you can't see."

"Really it's fine."

Matt gave a loud sigh. "Come on. Get up here."

"What?"

"Get up on the bed. I'm not having you sitting there unable to see the goddamn TV when I'm here in this massive bed with a perfect view."

James looked reluctant.

"I don't bite. Even when I've had a drink." Matt felt himself immediately flush at his provocative words. Glad of the dark, he cursed himself.

"If you're sure." James took his bottle and climbed onto the bed. Pushing the covers back, Matt grabbed hold of his casted leg as he shuffled across to the other side of the bed.

"Here." James helped him by positioning the pillows back under it before drawing the covers up around 54

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Matt's waist. Matt pulled one of the pillows from beneath his head and put it on James' side.

As Matt turned back to the TV, James sank onto the pillow and took another drink of beer. Matt's bottle was almost finished. They watched in silence as the film unfolded to a travelling fair in a small German town. Matt sniggered as the film's eponymous 'hero', the mountebank Caligari, introduced his 'act', a somnambulist named Cesare. A black-haired man appeared standing upright in a coffin shaped box, wearing a skin-tight black bodysuit, his eyes heavily done in black make-up, his lips dark, his face ghastly white.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Him."

"Matt," James said haughtily. "That's Conrad Veidt, master of German cinema and one of my favourite actors.

Show some respect."

Matt smiled, pretending to be chastened and turned back to the screen as the man in question lifted his lashes, revealing startlingly large, staring eyes. He finished his beer as a cocky man in the audience asked the somnambulist how long he would live. The staring man's thin lips moved. The subtitles read, "Until dawn."

Matt cackled.

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"Right, that's it." James moved to snatch the remote from Matt's knee.

Matt's hand closed over his, stopping him. "No, don't. I'm sorry."

Heads turned; their eyes met. In the darkness, James' were pools of black. The silence stretched between them, broken only by the background music of the DVD.

Very slowly, James extracted his hand from under Matt's, his fingers drifting across his palm in a way which made Matt suddenly shiver as though someone had walked across his grave.

James got up off the bed. He opened two more bottles and brought them back. Already Matt felt a little light-headed from the first, but readily accepted the second.

He would just love to get drunk tonight. It seemed to be the solution to all his problems.

Matt watched the rest of the film in silence for the most part, only sniggering at a couple more parts. He turned to look at James as the credits came up. "I liked it."

"Don't say that just to spare my feelings," James said in mock-offence.

"No, really I did."

James got off the bed and came back with a final bottle each.

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Matt took it, now feeling sleepy and content. He wasn't a big drinker, but two beers rarely produced this effect on him. Even his voice sounded a little slurred when he spoke. "What now?"

"Choose another." James got up to remove the disc.

Matt studied the boxes in the light cast by the TV.

"No way. Richard Burton in a horror film?"

James put the disc back in its box. " *The Medusa Touch*. Great seventies film, but another one you might find a touch cheesy." He smiled, his teeth bright in the semi-darkness.

James inserted the disc into the machine and came back to the bed. The opening credits rolled, and Matt was immediately gripped. James had great taste in films; cheesy and obscure, but unusual and interesting.

Matt turned his head at a light bump against his shoulder. James' head lolled there, his mouth slightly open, eyes closed. Matt stared a moment. Then he turned his attention back to the film, leaving James to his sleep. It must be exhausting looking after him. Either that, or James really couldn't take his beer. He preferred the second option.

After another half an hour, James' head moved suddenly and fell further over Matt's shoulder so his face

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pressed into his clavicle, his breath hot through the thin cotton of his sleeveless T-shirt. A moment later, James sighed against him, and an arm went over Matt's torso, the hand curling around his back. Matt went rigid in shock, wincing at the pressure on his broken ribs. He stared down at James' dark head. He sat so stiffly in his bed his muscles began to ache. He turned his head back to the screen and slowly made himself relax, sinking down a little into his pillows, allowing his nurse to remain where he was.

A good few minutes later Matt felt a warm wetness on his shoulder and recoiled



immediately, causing James to drop his head and awaken abruptly.

"James," Matt growled. "You're drooling on me."

He put a hand to the wet patch on his T-shirt.

James looked beyond embarrassed. He climbed from the bed. "I'll get you another shirt," he mumbled, going to the drawer. He drew out another shirt and came back to Matt, putting it on the bed and moving his hands to the hem of Matt's shirt, making as though to help him strip off.

"I can do it," Matt said testily as he removed his arm from his sling and sat forward with discomfort, lifting his shirt.

James took his discarded shirt and retreated across 58

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the room to the laundry basket. "I should go." He loitered by the door.

"You should." Matt didn't look at him. He heard the door close, and then silence descended, except for the film playing away to itself.

He couldn't finish watching it now. He shut off the DVD player and TV and lay down in the dark. What had just happened? James had been *holding* him, and Matt had *let* him. They had laid comfortably together like... oh God.

As his eyes started to close, he realised he had felt at peace that night.

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# Chapter Six

Lewis turned up unannounced the next morning, entering with Severine as she brought breakfast. It was a relief to see him because Matt could avoid being alone with James now after the awkwardness of last night.

"Hey," he greeted Lewis and thanked Severine as she put his tray down.

Lewis mumbled a hello and sank into a chair.

Clearly something was wrong.

"Are you sure you don't want breakfast, Lewis?"

Severine asked.

"No thanks. I'm not staying long."

After Severine left Matt's attention turned to Lewis.

"What's up?"

Lewis kept his head bowed so his hair fell across his eyes. "I went out with Nick last night."

Something terrible was coming. Really terrible.

"We got absolutely wasted and ended up back at his place."

"And?" Matt's skin crawled with trepidation.

"He kissed me."

"I see." This was Matt's usual, emotionless response to devastating news. It had been the very thing he'd said 60

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when told he would have a permanent scar on his face.

"I stopped him."

"Good."

Lewis lifted his head. "After I let him do it a while,"

he said in a rush, "because I liked it."

Matt stared. "Was that all he did?"

Lewis nodded.

Matt looked away, out of the window. "I don't know why you felt the need to tell me this, Lewis. It's not really something I want to hear.

What is it you want? For me to give you my blessing for you to fag it up with Nick?"

When his attention turned back to Lewis, his face was scarlet, his blue eyes blazing

with anger. "You fucking prick," Lewis spat. "I don't know what I was thinking coming here. Do you think I *want* to feel this way about him? Because I don't and I don't need shit from you about it. I need some fucking help *dealing* with it."

He rose abruptly from the chair.

"Lewis." Matt reached out hopelessly towards him as he stalked across the room.

"Go to hell." Lewis slammed the door behind him.

As Matt sank back against his pillows, a little numb 61

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with disbelief, he heard voices exchanged in the hallway outside his room. A moment later, James entered.

"Lewis looked upset," he remarked.

Matt sat up a little. "So he should," he growled before he could stop his big mouth. "He's fucking *queer*."

James regarded him. "Is that so?" he questioned coolly. "That's how Lewis referred to himself, is it?"

"Don't be smart with me, James, I'm not in the fucking mood. He got kissed by Nick last night. He came here today to confess that he enjoyed it. I don't know what he fucking wants from me."

"Well let's summarise, Matt." James was coldly sarcastic. "Your best friend is questioning his sexuality, surely one of the biggest things a man ever has to face. He comes to you for help, for understanding, and all he gets is a torrent of homophobic abuse. And why? Just because he has feelings for another man. I've only met your friends once and even *I* could see those two were in love."

Matt's face burned. "I don't think so."

"Somehow I doubt you're an expert on love."

Matt bristled even further. "And *you* are?"

James shrugged. "I've been around."

"I *bet* you have."

"Meaning?"

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"Nothing."

"It wasn't 'nothing' or you wouldn't have said it."

James looked furious. "You didn't believe me when I said I wasn't gay?"

Matt shrugged. "Not especially."

James' eyes became hard chips of frozen turquoise.

"If you did or did not believe me, I wasn't aware it was a pre-requisite of the job for your nurse to be heterosexual."

"Well it is," Matt snapped.

"How bigoted of you."

"I didn't like the way you were laid all over me last night," Matt burst out, ignoring him. "I didn't like that at all, and I don't think a person in your position should be acting that way towards his patient."

James went white with rage. "What are you saying?" His voice trembled with fury. "Are you accusing me of acting inappropriately towards you? Because voicing that opinion could lead to me losing my licence; you fucking asshole."

James' angry words were like a slap to the face, causing Matt to grow repentant. "No James, I..." he tried to say before his nurse cut him off.

"We're done." James voice was coldly calm now. "I think I've had about as much as I can take from you. I tried 63

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*really* hard with you, Matt, but I can honestly say you have not *one* redeeming quality. You're an egotistical, self-centred bigot, and I'm really not surprised you're stuck in this massive house on your own."

Matt stared at him in disbelief. The words burned him to the core. Their eyes remained locked for another moment before James left the room. His footsteps sounded heavily on the stairs. A moment later the front door slammed, leaving

total silence.

Matt lay down slowly, face turned to the window, listening to the sound of an engine starting on the drive below and a car peeling away on squealing tyres. He closed his eyes. His skin seemed to sting all over from James'

vicious words. The room suddenly felt very empty.

For a moment he imagined a faint trace of James lingered in the air. Then his glance shifted to the opposite side of the bed where James had lain the previous evening.

Slowly, he moved across and lay down with his face turned into the pillow. He could smell him there distinctly, some sweet, citrus smell of whatever gunk James used on his hair, as familiar a smell to Matt now as the scent of himself.

He closed his eyes. His good arm slipped beneath the pillow, and he lay still.

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His cell rang some time later. He reached out to pluck it from the bedside table, with an irrational hope that the caller would be James.

"What's your fucking problem, asshole?" Joel spat, not waiting for a reply to this obviously rhetorical question.

"Lewis has been here ranting over what you said to him this morning, you fucking prick."

Matt closed his eyes. He sincerely wished he'd not woken up that morning. He wished he was still drinking beer and watching old horror movies with his nurse; the first time he had been happy in such a long while.

"Fucking say something, dickhead."

"Doesn't it bother you that Nick and Lewis are giving it Brokeback?"

"He says it was one kiss, Matt. And what does it matter to you who your friends fuck, as long as they're happy?"

Matt remained silent.

"You better call him right now and say sorry, dickwad," Joel shouted before slamming the phone down.

Matt closed his phone with a sigh. Then he opened it again. Searching the address book, he called up Nick's number and connected to it.

"Hey." Nick sounded tired and hung-over.

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"Hey, Nick." Matt tried to sound casual. "What're you doing?"

"Just going over to Lewis'." Even over the sound of traffic, Matt heard the evasiveness, the nervousness in his friend's voice.

"Why have you never told me you're gay, Nick?"

Silence prevailed. Finally Nick managed to stutter,

"W-What?"

"Come on, you heard me. I had Lewis here earlier."

"Whatever he said, it wasn't..."

"So you didn't kiss him?"

"I was drunk..."

"Are you going to say it didn't mean anything?"

Silence again.

There was Matt's answer. James had been right about what he'd observed on only meeting Lewis and Nick once. How come Matt had been so blind to it?

"I have to go."

"Lewis is very confused over what you did last night."

"I know that," Nick replied in a low voice. "That's why he asked me to go over. To talk about it."

"Call me later."

"Yeah. Bye." Nick terminated the call.

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Matt immediately called Lewis.

"I can't talk to you right now," Lewis answered without preamble. "I'm expecting Nick."

"I know. I just spoke to him. Listen..."

"Don't. Just fucking don't. I'm going to tell him last night was wrong. That he shouldn't ever touch me again because I'm not a fag. Okay? I hope you're happy with that."

Matt squeezed his eyes shut. "No I'm not happy with that, Lewis. I'm not happy with anything which makes you *un* happy. Do you want to be with him?"

When Lewis replied, his voice trembled. "I don't know. That's why I came to you this morning..."

"I'm sorry, Lewis. I'm so sorry."

"Save it." Lewis ended the call.



Misery welled up in Matt as he lay there. He began to think just how dear to him Lewis and Nick were. He tried to imagine the two of them together, as a couple, and asked himself why that bothered him; why he wouldn't like to see his closest friends happy with each other. A sneaking little voice whispered one word to him. *Jealousy*.

*Oh no!* He fought this accusation with every ounce of his being. *I'm not jealous of Lewis or Nick! I'm not that way!*

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No, you're jealous of how they feel about each other, the voice told him. Of how they'll parade their love in front of you if they get together. You, who have nothing, who lies alone night after night with your scarred face which no one will ever look at again.

You, who relies on his nurse for his only physical contact and now even *he* has abandoned you. *What have you done?*

His thoughts turned back to James. How had Matt's fight with Lewis led to James quitting? Where was he going to find another nurse at such short notice? He didn't *want* another nurse. It had seemed that he and James were on the same wavelength. James seemed to care for his mental well-being as well as his physical condition. James understood him. Or so Matt had thought. Why had Matt said those things to him? Why had he accused James of being gay, and why had he acted like he was bothered about James falling asleep on him? What the hell did it fucking matter anyway?

He opened his phone once more and connected to James' number. His heart beat hard in his chest with anxiety as he waited. James' cell was switched off. Matt swore.

After a moment's thought, he called the agency James worked for.

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"Hi there," he said with false cheer when a woman answered. "My name is Matthew Harmon. I'm currently employing a nurse from you, James Hayden. I'm having trouble getting hold of him this morning and wondered if you could give me his home number."

"We can't do that sir."

"You must. It's an emergency. I need to speak to him."

"What sort of emergency?" The woman sounded a little concerned. "Maybe you should call nine-one-one..."

"No, look..." Matt took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. "He won't mind that you give me his number..."

"We have a strict policy, sir. You could be anyone."

Matt bit his tongue. "Okay, look. Would you call him for me? Ask him to call me on my cell. Tell him it's important. Please."

This seemed to work. "Okay. I'll do that."

"Thank you." Matt closed his phone. He would be foolish to hold his breath for James' reply. He would do better to look around for another nurse. Why hadn't he asked the woman at the agency?

Instead he sank into his pillows. He didn't want to look for another nurse. The ringing of his cell startled him.

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He snatched it up, heart racing, and checked the caller ID.

He didn't recognise the number, and for a moment, his heart soared.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Matthew," said a male voice. "It's Dr.  
Martin."

Matt slumped back against the bed. "Hi, Doc."

"How are you doing?"

"Just fine."

"You don't sound just fine."

"I am. I'm fine and dandy."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter. What can I do for you?"

"Actually, I was looking for your nurse. I can't get hold of him on his cell."

"You and me both."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he quit."

"What? Why?"

"Something and nothing. It doesn't matter."

"It really does. If you've let a nurse of James' calibre go then it's a very sad day indeed."

Matt frowned. "I thought you only met him the other day. How do you know he's any good?"

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"James and I go way back, Matthew. I worked with him in the ER for years. He is one shit-hot nurse and more than that, he actually gives a damn too. What the hell have you done to make him quit?"

"Why do you assume it's something *I* did?"

"Well let's see, maybe it's because I know you," his doctor said sarcastically. He and Dr. Martin had had a prickly relationship since the car accident threw them together. Matt not being the most compliant of patients, the two had repeatedly clashed heads when Dr. Martin had tried to do his best for his stubborn charge. "Out with it."

"He was upset that I accused him of being gay. It's no big deal." Matt abridged the actual fight.

"What? Why exactly does that matter?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Oh come on. Don't you think I know you by now?"

You know what I've always thought about homophobic men? That they protest too much for a reason."

"What?"

"You know what I mean."

"No I don't."

"James is a very attractive man."

"Dr. Martin..."

"Don't give me that. You know what I'm saying."

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"I really don't like what you're saying."

"I'm sorry to offend you, Matthew, but you know, *shame* on you. If James calls, tell him I need to speak to him about your drugs." He hung up.

Matt couldn't take much more that morning. What exactly had Dr. Martin accused him of there? Of wanting James himself? The thought made his stomach churn.

Suddenly his cell rang again, and he snatched it up.

"It's James."

"Hi."

"What's happened? I was told it was an emergency."

Matt was surprised at the barely-concealed concern in James' terse voice. "It's not. I just... need you to come back."

James paused before replying. "Why?"

Tell him now, Matt's conscience urged. *Tell him you're sorry you're such an asshole, tell him you respect and admire him and you don't want to lose him.* "I can't get another nurse at such short notice."

"You're such a prick."

"I think we established that earlier. You know very well you can't just quit. You owe me four weeks' notice."

"I owe you nothing."

"What about all your stuff?"

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"I'll send for it."

"Look... come back for your stuff. Let's just... talk about this."

There's nothing to talk about."

"I'm asking for a favour here. I haven't had my morning meds. I've no one to help me. At least just come back for today. Please." All this time Matt had strived to prove his independence. Now he seemed to want to make himself vulnerable in James' eyes.

The silence dragged on. "I'll be there in an hour."

The phone went dead.

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## Chapter Seven

Matt lay there for awhile contemplating what he would say to James when he arrived, and if the words 'I'm sorry' could actually pass his lips. Anxiety crippled him, and Matt never sweated anything, at least professionally.

He felt perfectly at ease at standing up in front of a hundred people to speak, or dealing with any crisis which came his way. He had never had to deal with a man who'd told him he had not one single redeeming quality, and whose opinion he suddenly seemed to give a damn about.

Matt had already said sorry once that day, to Lewis; it shouldn't be so hard to repeat the words to James, especially when he would mean them desperately. He glanced at the clock. He needed to get up, get washed, shaved and dressed for James' return. Why this mattered, he didn't know.

He shuffled across the bed to its edge, swung his legs over, helping his left one along with his hands as usual, slid carefully down to the floor to stand up on one foot and leaned against the bed. He reached over to where his crutches rested against the bedside table and slipped his arms inside them. Hopping with them hurt both his leg and his shoulder, not to mention his pelvis and ribs. He screwed

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his face up in pain and continued over to the wardrobe where he took out shorts, T-shirt and boxers. It seemed like he had lived in shorts forever. He glanced down at the cast.

He didn't doubt that once it came off, he would never want to wear shorts again, imagining the scar that bones sticking through the skin had left.

He hung his clothes over his shoulder and proceeded to the bathroom at a slow pace. He ran some water in the sink and washed before laboriously getting dressed. He brushed his teeth and used mouthwash and then he draped his other clothes over his shoulder and started out of the bathroom.

He paused in the entrance to the bedroom to adjust his grip on the crutches. As he brought them forward again, his T-shirt fell from his shoulder, one of his crutches got tangled up within it, and he lurched forward face first onto the carpet. He fell heavily with a loud groan and lay there for a long moment, completely winded, eyes closed, and breathing hard. He had no urge to move. Suddenly he was so utterly defeated that he knew he couldn't make it back to his feet, nor did he want to.

*Get up*, his inner voice told him scornfully, *you're pathetic. You haven't even had a shave yet, and James is going to be here any minute.* I don't give a shit what you 75

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think, he told it. I just want to lay here. I can't do this anymore.

He didn't know how long he had lain there with his face pressed into the carpet before he heard the creak of the bedroom door and swift footsteps, too heavy to be those of Severine. "Matt. *Matt.*" Hands roughly turned him onto his back and tilted his head back, extending his neck painfully.

A face came down close to his as though ready to give Matt the kiss of life.

"I'm not dead."

"Jesus," James said, immediately drawing back, but keeping one hand on Matt's head, fingers threading through his hair. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I'm all right." Matt lay gasping a little like a stranded fish.

"Come on." James knelt over him, legs on either side of Matt's knees, and gripped his right hand. He put his other hand behind Matt's shoulder and pulled him up so Matt was way closer to James than he felt he needed to be.

But the pain in his ribs overwhelmed all consideration of this. He panted with it, his eyes closed, hand gripping James' hard.

"Let's get you back on the bed."



*And pumped full of opiates like the junkie I am.*

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Matt opened his eyes and found James' own fixed on his face in concern.

He put his left hand on the floor and ignored the pain in his shoulder as he levered himself up, bending his right leg to help him as James stood and pulled Matt up with him.

Matt, trying desperately not to lean all his weight on James, dragged the cast up with him, overbalancing a little so James caught him firmly around the hips and steadied him, moving his hands to the small of his back when Matt hissed in pain.

"Okay?"

The two were standing very close, James a few inches shorter than Matt, his fingers lying flush against Matt's skin where his T-shirt had ridden up a little. They were warm and soft, and they made goose-pimples appear.

James gripped Matt's crutches and helped him insert his arms into them. Then he kept a helpful hand on his back as Matt started to walk towards the bed.

After a few torturous steps Matt turned, leaned back against the bed and allowed James to take his crutches from him. He breathed heavily, his face dewed lightly in sweat.

"Lift yourself up. I'll get your leg."

James hoisted his cast onto the bed as Matt moved 77

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himself into the middle. He lay there for a moment panting, eyes on James.

His nurse actually looked sorry for him. Matt bristled in indignation. "I'll give you two weeks' notice,"

James said in a low voice. "Take it or leave it."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really. I'll get you some pain-relief."

Matt's head turned to follow James' figure across the room. For a moment his eyes travelled over the toned body. *James can run up and down my stairs at will. He can turn and walk away from me any time he wants, get into his car and never see me again. His body is not broken the way mine is. It is perfect, and I ache with jealousy.*

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, and meant it more than he'd ever meant anything before in his life.

James' shoulders stiffened, his only reaction to Matt's words. He approached Matt's bed with a syringe in a tray with a sharps container. He discarded the needle from the syringe into the sharps box and unwrapped another.

Consternation started to prickle through Matt.

"What are you..." he began, almost stammering, staring at the needle even though he already knew. "Am I not having morphine?"

"No." James unwrapped a swab. "You're having 78

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diclofenac IM."

Matt groaned inwardly, more than familiar with intramuscular injections. "I don't..."

"You don't want it? It's all I'm offering."

Fuck him. Fucking fuck him. In the hospital he hadn't minded so much, but he

minded now; he minded very fucking much dropping his shorts for James. Their eyes met. Matt knew James wouldn't relent and give him morphine. He had promised to stop giving it to him, and it seemed he was sticking to that. Maybe this was Matt's punishment for being an asshole. In which case, James was very cruel.

"I don't like it."

"Matt," James sighed. "I've seen it all before. Do you know how many asses I've stuck needles into?"

Matt flushed. He averted his eyes, before rolling slowly onto his side. He hitched his boxers and shorts down, making sure to only expose the very top of his backside, because he knew the exact place it went. Some nurses hurt, some didn't. Most had to use considerable pressure and a big needle because his ass was so hard; many a time the needle just bounced off it.

A gloved finger touched him as James marked out the imaginary landmarks of his ass, and Matt flinched.

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"Relax." The cold touch of an alcohol swab rubbed the spot he had chosen, and Matt tensed. "Stop tensing."

Matt tried to relax his muscles. He felt James' latex-covered left hand lie along his right buttock, stretching the already taut skin even tighter, exposing the muscle. He winced as the needle penetrated the muscle smoothly.

James released his hold on Matt, and Matt heard the syringe fall into the sharps box.

Matt tugged his clothes up instantly and rolled onto his back. He followed James' figure with his eyes as he moved away. It was no big deal, so why did his face flame?

James had seen hundreds of asses, and he didn't look all that excited by having copped a feel of Matt's. If anything he looked bored and distracted as he peeled off his gloves and then scribbled on the chart.

"I meant what I said," Matt said quietly. "I *am* sorry."

"Sure," James said. "But I won't be changing my mind. Two weeks. If there's nothing else you want, I'm going to my room for a while." His gaze met Matt's, pale blue-green and unreadable.

Matt felt as defeated as he had while lying on that carpet. He turned his face to the window with an almost imperceptible nod.

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## Chapter Eight

Matt awoke to familiar voices. "Come out here a minute. He's asleep."

"What's the matter?"

"I quit. I've given him two weeks' notice."

"What? Why?" It was Lewis' voice raised incredulously.

Matt slitted open one eye. His back ached from sleeping on it. He rolled as much onto his side as he could, gaze seeking the partially open door.

"We had a fight. About the way he treated you this morning." James kept his voice low, but evidently his nurse didn't realise how sharp Matt's ears were.

Lewis did though, because he kept his voice even softer. Even so, Matt could still hear. "Look, there's no need to quit because of me, I can handle Matt, he's just..."

"An asshole?" James suggested. Matt curled one hand into a fist around the quilt.

"Misunderstood," Lewis said diplomatically. "You must have realised by now that he has to present a certain front to the world. He doesn't believe in weakness."

Matt shifted uncomfortably, his face hot.

"Yeah. It's a shame."

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"It is a shame," Lewis agreed. "Because the fact is, he hasn't spoken one word to anyone about the accident yet."

He nearly died, and he's dealt with that all on his own. I've tried to get him to open up, but he says his life isn't an episode of Oprah. He needs to let it out, and if he won't do it to me, he'll have to do it to you. Or a shrink."

Matt bristled in indignation. How dare Lewis lay him bare to James this way? He didn't need to talk to anyone. He didn't die in the accident. He was recovering.

End of story. What else was there to say? Nothing. He just needed to get on with it.

But something tugged at his throat and his chest.

The same sensation he had felt as he lay helplessly on the bedroom floor, waiting to be rescued by James.

"I *have* tried," James said. "What's the deal with his foster parents?"

*Oh please no.* Matt squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

Lewis sighed. "They never loved him. Whenever I went over to his house, they were never there. He was looked after by a succession of nannies and starved for affection. He's never known how to express his emotions, and he hates being touched."

"I noticed that. Jesus, Lewis, I feel so sorry for him."

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Matt bit his lip until it hurt. He had been right about James' pity for him from the start. It made him feel even more helpless and pathetic than he already did.

"I'm pretty sure he's just aching for some form of contact, but he's afraid to ask."

Matt was pretty sure he was going to kill Lewis.

"I'd help him if he'd let me, Lewis." Why would James give a shit after

everything?

"You just have to give him time. Don't quit."

"And what about you?"

"What about me?"

"It's none of my business but... have you resolved the issue Matt was so angry about this morning?"

"You mean Nick?" Lewis' voice sank even lower.

"Yeah."

Lewis gave a sigh. "If you call sleeping with him this afternoon resolving the issue, then yes."

Matt almost let out a gasp. Jesus *fucking* Christ.

James chuckled. "Good for you, man. Why don't you wake him up? I suspect he'll be glad to see you."

"I wouldn't bet on it," Lewis murmured. Matt closed his eyes. His mind whirled with what he had just heard.

Footsteps approached his bed. "Hey, Matt," Lewis 84

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said softly.

Matt pretended to wake groggily from sleep. "Hey."

He was murderously angry with Lewis, but he couldn't address the things he'd said with James still in the room, even if he pretended to be busy writing his notes in the corner.

Lewis pulled up a chair and sat close to the bed.

Matt immediately withdrew his hand when Lewis reached for it. His friend gave a small sigh and sat back. "James said you had a fall, are you okay?"

Matt nodded tightly. "Why don't we talk alone?" he asked in a low voice. He wanted to bawl Lewis out for all the shit he'd just overheard, but he couldn't do it in front of his nurse.

Lewis frowned. "James knows everything that went on this morning, and the fact is you took your problems with me out on him, so I don't see why he should leave."

Matt's gaze met James'.

"I can go," James said quietly.

Matt thought of what he wanted to say to Lewis, and then realised this would make things worse between them. As much as he wanted to kill the guy for what he had revealed of his nature to James, the time was for apologies and not more hostility.

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"It doesn't matter," he mumbled, turning his attention back to Lewis. "Where's Nick?"

Lewis lowered his head. "I don't know."

Matt regarded him sceptically, finding this hard to believe. He had a vision of his two friends sweaty and entwined on a bed which he pushed quickly out of his mind before he became nauseous. He wondered if Nick waited in Lewis' bed for him to come home.

"Want to tell me how it went this afternoon?" He wanted, masochistically, to hear Lewis lie to him.

Lewis didn't speak.



Matt felt a little sorry for him. "You can tell me anything, Lewis, you know that."

Lewis' head rose, and defiant blue eyes met his.

"Oh, like I told you this morning? When I came here as your best friend with the biggest problem I ever had in my life, and you told me I was a fag?"

"I don't think I actually used those words." Matt's gaze moved again to James, who had his back resolutely turned.

"Didn't you? Well you can't think any less of me than you already do, so... I went to bed with Nick this afternoon."

Matt allowed this fact to sink in for the second time.

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The fact that Lewis had actually just told him this to his face, instead of only allowing his nurse to know his whispered confession seemed more startling than the actual fact.

When he paused for thought, Lewis said sarcastically, "Go on then. Aren't you going to say *I see*?"

"You're a smart ass, Lewis," Matt growled.

"Well you always say *I see* when you're fucking pissed off."

"I'm not pissed off."

"Aren't you?"

"No. So what happened after?"

"Nick got up, put his clothes on and left."

"That bastard. If he hurts you, Lewis, I swear to God..."

"He hasn't hurt me." Lewis averted his gaze.

"Hasn't he? He walks out on you like you're some cheap one-night stand, and that didn't hurt?"

Matt suddenly realised Lewis' lip trembled and he bit it hard. Tears started to slide from beneath his lowered lashes. Matt groaned, both uncomfortable and moved, eyes flickering to James as though his nurse would know what to do when it came to shows of emotion. James turned his way, gaze on Lewis before meeting Matt's.

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Matt lifted a hand uselessly in Lewis' direction, his fingers hovering near Lewis' own, which lay on the bed, before lowering it again. What could he do? Invite his friend onto the bed for a hug? He didn't think so.

James moved decisively, approaching behind Lewis and laying a hand easily on the back of his neck as though this was a normal thing for him, to touch virtual strangers, offering comfort. Of course, it was. For a moment, Matt envied James. This man spent his working hours touching strangers. His job gave him a licence to do that, and he wasn't afraid of doing so. He had probably touched hundreds of people during his life, whereas Matt had touched much less, most in the dark, most during a fumbled attempt to be less lonely.

James' fingers squeezed Lewis' neck lightly. He stooped a little to look over Lewis' shoulder at his tear-streaked face. "Hey. It's okay."

Matt should have been the one doing this, and he was never more ashamed of himself. He had never seen Lewis cry before. He had never expected his friend to so easily crumple into tears at a few words about *Nick*.

"I'm sorry." Lewis rubbed a hand roughly over his face.

"What for?" James asked softly. "What's there to be 88

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sorry about?"

*I'll bet he says the same to bereaved relatives. I'll bet he has standard patter for when people are crying all over him.* Matt cursed his nurse for his humanity. He cursed him for being a better man than *he* would ever be.

Lewis still swiped almost angrily at his eyes. "I was so scared you were going to die." The abrupt turn startled Matt. His friend lifted his head, and watery blue eyes fixed on his. "I sat by your bed day after day begging whatever god is up there not to take you. And I was so fucking scared. I couldn't even tell Nick how scared I was. But he was there. He was there every single minute for me, and I think that's why I fell for him."

Matt sat motionless, eyes fixed on Lewis. He had been unconscious while his life hung in the balance. He had never once considered the friends who must have sat around his bed for hours on end. It had never once occurred to him that any of them were as traumatised as Matt himself.

*I lie here wrapped up in my own misery, never sparing a thought for the feelings of my friends when they thought I was going to die.* He felt the treacherous lump in his throat once more as he stared at Lewis.

His friend carried on in a trembling voice. "Nick 89

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stayed at my house every single night you were in hospital and he lay next to me in bed holding me while I cried and waited for the phone to ring and for them to say you were gone."

Matt stared mutely, gaze lifting as Lewis stood up.

"And you're going to let me do this, you bastard," his friend said almost angrily. "Because I *need* it from you."

He climbed abruptly onto Matt's bed, taking him in his arms, crushing Matt to him, his face pressed into his shoulder, taking deep shuddering breaths. Matt's skin crawled. He fought down a rising panic, eyes closed, taking deep breaths.

When he opened them, James had gone. He tried to disentangle himself from Lewis, but his friend merely held on tighter. "Please just hold me," he muttered. "Just show me you're fucking *human* for the first time. Please."

Matt swallowed the lump in his throat down again.

The weight and warmth of Lewis' body comforted him, even though his ribs protested. But at least Lewis kept the lower half of his body away, thoughtful enough not to lean on the poor, shattered bone of Matt's pelvis.

He moved his right arm slowly and wrapped it around Lewis' back, fingers pressing into the flesh. Lewis sank deeper into Matt's bigger body with a murmur of relief 90

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as Matt's arm tightened and he held his friend, for the first time ever in their long relationship.

"I love you," Lewis said against his neck. "I never told you that because you would tell me I'm a fag, but I do.

You've been the best friend anyone could ever have."

Now the lump in Matt's throat threatened to asphyxiate him. "No, Lewis. No I haven't. I've been the worst." He had never felt such gut-wrenching hurt in his life. If he had been alone with these feelings in his breast he would have wept until no more tears would come. As it was, the tightness in his chest suffocated him.

Lewis finally untangled himself several minutes later and was sitting silently in

the chair when Joel entered the room.

"Nick's at my house," he said quietly.

"Did he... has he..." Lewis stammered.

"He hasn't said anything. He's getting drunk."

Matt scowled and reached over to the bedside table for his cell. He called up Nick's number from his address book. "Get your ass over here right now, Nick," he snapped as soon as Nick answered with a bleary hello, cutting the connection before he could even answer.

"What are you doing?" Lewis cried in panic.

"Giving Nick some friendly advice on how to treat 91

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you. You don't have to stay. He'll be grateful I can't get out of bed, that's for sure."

"Don't."

"Hush, Lewis. Do you really think I'm going to allow Nick to treat you badly?"

"He hasn't..."

"Hasn't he? Walking out on you after he's fucked you isn't treating you badly, is it?"

Lewis hung his head and bit his lip.

"Now if you want to wait downstairs while I speak to him you can, or leave; it's your choice."

Lewis cast a look of indecision at Joel. "Come on,"

Joel said quietly, putting an arm around Lewis' shoulders.

"We'll go to the games room and play pool."

"I don't want you telling him I've told you about me and him," Lewis protested.

"Whatever. Go on."

Lewis and Joel left the bedroom. James put his head around the door. "Can I finish your drugs?"

Matt nodded. He took the remote and lifted his bed a little. Then he flicked on the TV to fill the silence. James came over to the bed with Matt's antibiotics. He connected the giving set to Matt's cannula.

Matt studied James' face unawares as he twisted the 92

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kinks from the line. He noted the sooty lashes against the pale cheeks and the light dusting of freckles over James'

nose. He noticed how pink and moist James' mouth was, the tongue darting out to moisten it further.

Without lifting his eyes, James spoke. "What?"

Matt turned his head away, embarrassed. "Nothing."

The door opened suddenly. Nick looked defiant. He moved inside, nodding to James who greeted him in return and retreated to his notes.

Matt gave Nick one of his famous looks, a look which made most men quiver, but which had never had that effect on Nick. "It's about Lewis."

"You don't say."

"What the fuck are you doing with him?"

Nick glanced at James. "Has he told you?" he asked Matt.

"Yeah."

Nick flushed, looking awkward. "I never imagined he would share something so..."

Matt moved on swiftly. "Well he has. And I got the impression you were less than gentlemanly after."

"This isn't really any of your business, Matt."

"Isn't it?"

"No. I get the impression you haven't been laid in so 93

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long that you have to butt into everyone else's sex lives."

Matt's gaze darted to James, who pretended he wasn't listening. "If you want to get your rocks off Nick, go pick someone up in a bar. Don't play games with my best friend. I don't fucking like it, not at all."

"Who says I'm playing games with him?" Nick shot back immediately.

" I do. He was here fucking *crying*, Nick. That tells me all I need to know."

Nick looked regretful. His eyes lowered. "It's not what you think, Matt."

"Isn't it? So you're in love with him?"

Nick didn't answer the question. Instead he said,

"Where is he?"

"Downstairs in the game room. You going to go see him or not?"

Nick nodded and left the room. Matt gave a sigh and tried to relax back against his pillows. It wasn't long before Joel re-entered the room. "Thought I'd better leave those two to it," he said, taking the seat next to Matt's bed.

"So what's your assessment of the situation Joel?"

Joel shrugged. "They're in love. Whether they're going to finally do something about it, I don't know."

"Jesus Christ," Matt muttered. "My two friends. A 94

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pair of fags."

"You know what, man? I'm fucking sick of listening to this shit. Just because you're a sad and lonely bastard who needs to get fucking laid, don't make everyone else out to be disgusting just because they don't conform to your little stereotype."

Matt regarded him with narrowed eyes. "If anyone else mentions one more time that I need to get laid Joel..."

"Well you fucking *do*. Christ, I can bring someone here for you; it's not a problem..."

"Don't be so stupid. I can't even move from my bed without being in crippling pain. Do you really think I'm lying here thinking about sex all day?"

"Yeah, I do, as it happens," Joel said with a snort.

"With that hot nurse of yours around all day, I bet you're permanently hard."

Matt's mouth opened and closed soundlessly like a fish. Over Joel's shoulder, his gaze met James' and quickly moved away.

Joel was on a roll now and didn't intend to be silenced. "You're such a fucking homophobe, I've always thought you were bent anyway."

Matt abruptly tried to launch himself from the bed.

James rushed over and grabbed him by the shoulders as 95



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Matt's casted leg crashed to the floor. He howled in pain.

"Help me," James snapped over his shoulder, and Joel immediately came forward and helped James manoeuvre Matt bodily back into bed even as he writhed and fought them impotently, cursing Joel foully.

"You need to calm down right now," James told Matt sternly. "I'm not giving you any morphine, so forget it and get a grip."

Matt's eyes flicked to his in astonishment. His teeth were gritted in pain, his breathing ragged.

"Give the junkie his morphine, and let him hold court from his bed on everyone else's lives, seeing as he hasn't got one of his own," Joel said scornfully.

"You fucking little shithead." Matt attempted to sit up. Both James and Joel held him down.

"Sticks and stones, man," Joel drawled. "I'm sick of listening to your opinions. Why don't I give you something to *really* be upset about? I've slept with guys. When I want cheap, dirty, hard sex, I choose a guy. Right now, I've got a fuck buddy. I call him up when I want my dick sucked."

Matt stared. " *Fuck* buddy?" The foreign phrase on his tongue felt offensive.

"Yeah. You should get one yourself man for all that pent up aggression you've got. James here would be 96

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perfect."

James spoke first in the deadly silence, his pale face a little flushed. "I think you need to leave now, Joel, and let him calm down."

Joel curled his lip in derision at Matt and stalked from the room, slamming the door.

Matt's whole body throbbed with both pain and humiliation. "I'm so sorry for my friend's big mouth." His eyes slid a little fearfully to James, who shrugged.

"It's cool. Emotions are running high between the four of you at the moment. It's a difficult time."

Matt stared at him in disbelief. "How can you be so calm about this when he just suggested I make you my fuck buddy?"

"I don't have as many issues as you regarding sex,"

James responded. "I've had worse insults."

Matt could only look into his aquamarine eyes with confusion. He had no idea what this statement meant. That James was 'heteroflexible', despite denying being gay? That the thought of being Matt's fuck buddy wasn't so disagreeable to him? He had no ready answer, and luckily, his nurse relieved him of the necessity by saying, "Take some deep breaths now, the pain will go soon enough."

Matt kept his eyes on James. He tried to read his 97

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thoughts through those pale, intense eyes. He didn't think of Joel now, or Lewis and Nick, only James. He felt his nurse's hand on his shoulder.

"Concentrate. Deep breaths."

Matt's eyes slipped shut. James' hand burned him through the thin cotton of his T-shirt. Very slowly with the lightest touch, Matt lifted his own hand and placed it on top of his nurse's. The fingers under his moved, sliding between his, hooking Matt's fingers forwards so they were entwined.

Matt's deep breaths became a little shallow and a little fast. His eyes opened, and

he saw James' own were fixed intently on his face, teeth biting into his lower lip.

"James..." Matt started to say in an unsteady voice.

Their eyes held for another few seconds. The thought disappeared from his head. Matt had no idea what he had been about to say. Abruptly, his nurse pulled his hand away and strode quickly from the room without looking back.

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## Chapter Nine

Matt remained silent the next day and James said little, disappearing as soon as he could after breakfast and leaving Matt to navigate to the bathroom. He propped his crutches against the wall and put his clothes over the side of the bath. Knowing James wouldn't be back, he left the door open to listen to the music on *Fuse*, and filled the sink with water.

He stripped his shirt off and then paused to look down at himself. He examined his torso, staring at the surgical wounds.

Slowly, he lifted a hand and touched himself, his right hand on his left shoulder, running down to trace the prominent curve of his broken clavicle. His own hand felt strange on himself but not entirely uncomfortable. His hand moved down onto his firm pectoral. Deliberately he rubbed the small nipple a little and watched it become erect. He felt no corresponding desire to this involuntary reaction of his body. His hand continued down over his bruised, scarred torso, over the abdomen that now seemed not as firm and muscular as it had once been, and down into his groin.

He rubbed a moment. Matt had always been a 99

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champion masturbator, able to get himself off in record time, and found it a lot less hassle than sex in general. He didn't have to make conversation with himself, buy himself drinks beforehand or creep out of a strange bed at dawn. He didn't have to put up with being a trophy on the arm of some bleached blonde who only wanted him for his money.

Just allowing his own hand to take him into oblivion for a few minutes sometimes seemed better than any woman.

Matt continued to rub through the flimsy fabric of his shorts. It had been so long since he had knocked one out that his hand felt unfamiliar, and he soon realised his touch did nothing for him. He slid a hand down his shorts and boxers, his

fingers rough at his own body's disobedience, and closed his hand around his limp dick, tugging hard, trying to think sexual thoughts as he did.

Women going down on him; women on all fours for him. But all these women were faceless, the details of their bodies hazy. He couldn't think of one single person alive to get him off. Not one. A vague thought drifted into his mind and he shoved it viciously back into his subconscious before it even had time to take root.

He removed his hand. So it was true then, what Dr.

Martin had warned him about. The impotence. His hand moved back to his abdomen and onto one of the surgical 100

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wounds. Startling against the pale cream of his skin, little indentations were still visible lining the skin on both sides of it where the wound had been stapled together after surgery. Those staples were long gone now, but the impressions of them remained.

Matt ran a finger around the edges of the wound. It was well healed, the edges knitted together. But how ugly.

So ugly. His hand moved to his left side, fingers tracing a smaller but no less unsightly wound where the chest drain had been inserted.

He pushed his shorts a little off his hips to reveal the scars on both sides where his pelvis had been drilled into and screwed back together with all manner of nuts and bolts. Then finally, he lifted a hand to trace the edges of the scar on his face. The scar he refused to look at.

He was broken into bits. Physically and mentally destroyed. Who would ever want this damaged, scarred body again? They had put him back together, but mentally he remained in pieces.

"They're not so bad," a voice spoke behind him, and he almost jumped out of his skin. "Sorry." James moved into the bathroom, gaze lowering to Matt's exposed

wounds. He reached a hand out, one finger gently stroking the edge of the worst wound, the one where Matt's spleen 101

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had been removed. "As I've already said to you, they're nothing. Trust me. *Nothing*. They don't change you."

And Matt felt an instantaneous reaction at the touch of someone other than himself. A shudder ran the length of his body, and all exposed skin on his torso instantly broke out into goose-pimples. He stepped back abruptly from James' hand, gripping the sink behind him so he didn't overbalance.

"There are no mirrors here." James' voice was low and intimate. "Have you even seen this scar on your face that you think is so terrible?"

Matt lowered his head. "I know it's terrible from seeing people's reactions to it."

"Which people? Certainly not me; nor your friends."

"Yes, my friends. When they first saw it."

James sighed. "Let me bring you a mirror, Matt. It's time you saw."

Matt shook his head fiercely.

"Come on."

"No."

James kept his gaze fixed on his so long that Matt became uncomfortable. "Do you want to talk about it yet?

The accident I mean."

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Matt took a deep breath. "I heard you and Lewis talking. What he said to you. He shouldn't have done. He was way out of line."

"Really? Which bits in particular?"

"All of them."

"I happen to think Lewis was spot-on with his assessment of you. You need to talk to someone."

Matt glared at him. "I don't need to feel fucking sorry for myself."

"It's not about that."

"Then what's it about? You want to hear how I sat pinned in that fucking car for an hour and a half while they cut me out? You want to hear how no amount of morphine even touched the pain, so I finally prayed I would just *die* just to take it away? You want to hear about how my doctor told me I'll probably be impotent the rest of my life? You want to hear how I think no one will ever look at this scarred face ever again?" His voice had risen to a pitiful cry. His throat felt full of broken stones.

James' gaze didn't waver from his. His aquamarine eyes were tender with empathy. "Yes, it's what I want to hear. I want to know if you're grateful you're alive."

"No I'm not fucking grateful," Matt said between gritted teeth. "I'm a mess. I'll never be the same again."

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"You *will*." James put his hand on Matt's wrist. "But I wish you'd let it out."

"You don't even know me. Why the fuck should you care?"

If Matt offended him, James hid it well. "The way I see it, your mental health needs much more nursing than your physical health. I can get your doctor to refer you to a psychiatrist."

"I don't need a shrink."

"I happen to think you do."

"I don't give a fuck what you think."

James sighed. He lowered his head. "For what it's worth, Matt," he said quietly, squeezing his wrist, "I think you're beautiful, with or without your scars."

He turned, closing the door swiftly behind him before Matt could speak again.

Matt leaned on the sink, bent over, breathing hard.

Slowly he felt himself starting to stiffen, and his eyes opened in surprise. Before his body could change its mind, he thrust his hand down his shorts and started to jerk himself into full erection. He didn't ask himself why this hard-on had suddenly appeared; he refused to. He was just grateful it had. One less cloud on the horizon. He wasn't impotent.

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He worked quickly and silently but it took a while, and he began to get frustrated that his climax was not easily obtainable despite his need. His forehead prickled with sweat from the exertion, and he clutched hard to the sink, hand rough on his straining erection, knowing he would be sore afterwards but not caring. He let out a few small gasps as his body began to tighten and rush towards orgasm.

"Matt?" came a sudden voice outside and a soft knock on the door.

Matt's hand froze on his cock. His eyes snapped open. He danced right on the edge of orgasm. He knew if he gave himself a couple more strokes it would all be over and his entire body trembled with the need to do so.



"Are you okay?"

Matt leaned on the sink, head bowed, trying to calm his breathing, hand tight around his dick.

"Matt, if you don't answer I'm going to have to come in."

"Please just... fuck off," Matt ground out between his teeth.

Silence fell. Matt's eyes closed and a thought invaded his mind. Despite the fact that James might have still been on the other side of the door, he clung to this thought and his hand moved unbidden once more firmly up 105

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his shaft. Suddenly he was coming, spurting over the edge of the sink in torrents while he pressed the fingers of his free hand against his mouth to keep from crying out. A soft gasp slipped free, and as he withered over the sink, he followed that up with some breathless moans, unable to stifle them. His head hung down, and his legs almost buckled. He clung to the porcelain for a long while until his heart slowed and his senses stopped swimming.

The bedroom was empty when he pushed open the door, much to his relief. Maybe James had stalked angrily away as soon as Matt had told him to fuck off. He made his way back to the bed and had just shuffled across into the centre of it when James entered the room.

"I didn't appreciate the way you spoke to me. You were so long I thought you had fallen and knocked yourself out or something."

"James," Matt said irritably, "don't you ever need private time in the bathroom?" He met his nurse's eyes confrontationally. He didn't really care anymore what James thought. Matt had never been embarrassed talking about masturbation with his friends. If Matt was a champion masturbator however, then Joel would represent his country if jerking off ever became an Olympic sport.

When Matt had the misfortune to share a hotel room with 106

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him last year, Joel had jerked off twice a day for a week.

And he wasn't quiet about it either.

James looked blank for a few seconds and then started to redden. "Right. Guess you must be feeling better?"

Matt stared at him. *Feeling better? Feeling fucking better because I'm jerking off in my bathroom thinking thoughts that no man should ever think? Yes, pleasuring myself with my own hand and being grateful I can still get it up has made me feel really fucking better.*

James moved away from the bed and picked up some magazines which were scattered on the floor. "Lewis called me last night. He wanted me to tell you he's going away for a few days. To think."

Matt didn't ask why Lewis had James' number or why his best friend was calling his nurse and not him. "I see. Is he going with Nick?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask him."

Lewis gone. The only person he could have spoken to about the thoughts he'd just had in the bathroom. He looked up at James and found his nurse silently scrutinising him. "What?" he asked belligerently.

James shook his head. "You're even more obnoxious than usual today."

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Matt stared at him. He and James really were done.

Whatever connection or friendship they had hesitantly shared, Matt had smashed beyond repair. James clearly despised him. The next two weeks were going to be

hell.

\* \* \* \*

Matt spent the rest of the week in a kind of numb fog with only his nurse for company. His friends didn't call him, and no way, stubborn as he was, would he call them.

He didn't instigate conversation with James, he just lay there silently and allowed his nurse to take his observations, look at his wounds, administer his drugs and inspect the toes encased in the cast for signs of circulatory problems. When James tried to speak to him, he offered monosyllabic replies. For the most part, Matt stared out of the window, watching as spring started to turn to summer, and longing for the kiss of the sun on his pale, anaemic skin. He had no desire to speak to James, no desire to try to mend any of those bridges which were long burned. Not when James would be gone soon.

Finally, James brought up the subject of his impending departure. "So I can give you a few numbers if you like. There are a couple of guys I know who are both

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great nurses, although I have to warn you, they're gay."

Matt's jaw tightened a little. "Not interested." He didn't take his gaze from the contemplation of a tiny robin perched on the outside window sill.

"I think you're cutting your nose off to spite your face."

Matt didn't reply.

"When are you going to call your friends?"

Matt glanced at him. He stayed silent. Nick was surely away with Lewis, which only left Joel. And he had no desire to talk to the man who'd revealed he had a male fuck buddy.

The silence dragged on until Matt looked away. He didn't particularly like staring into James' eyes for so long; something about it disquieted him. If James read Matt's soul by looking through the windows to it, he would see something there he didn't like. He would see the one and only thought Matt had had in his mind in that bathroom with his cock in his hand and James on the other side of the door.

To push it open, grab James by the shirt and drag him into the bathroom.

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# Chapter Ten

Eleven miserable days later, with his relationship with James going from bad to worse, Joel turned up late on a Saturday morning, looking hung-over and tired. He's probably been up all night fucking, Matt thought scornfully. He sat in a chair by the open window, looking out across his magnificent garden, inhaling the scent of the summer flowers.

Across the room, James did whatever kept him busy in his corner. The two had exchanged barely two words since breakfast. James was distant now, his manner cool.

He showed no interest in being here anymore.

"Listen man," Joel began awkwardly, "what I said..."

Matt held his hand up. "Forget it." Matt was never magnanimous; he always bore a grudge. But he'd had all this time for his grudge to dissipate into a sea of self-pity and self-loathing.

Over his shoulder, James smiled at Matt. His smile seemed sad. He was leaving in three days, and Matt still hadn't sorted out another nurse. He was trying not to think about being left alone.

"So, man," Joel gave an embarrassed cough. "What 110

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I said about you not getting laid. It was unfair, I mean it's not as though you can go cruising..."

"Yeah, Joel." Matt tried to head him off.

"And what I said about you fucking James..."

Matt's gaze darted to James. James merely regarded him contemplatively,

obviously not particularly bothered by Joel bringing this up again. "Enough, man." Matt took his crutches and stood laboriously, moving slowly to the bed.

"So I thought I could come over tomorrow," Joel said. "Get a takeout, a movie..."

He was trying hard. Matt was more than grateful.

He nodded. He tried not to look at

James as he remembered their own night watching movies. "Where's Nick?"

"I think he has plans." Joel looked evasive.

"Has he gone away with Lewis?"

"I don't know."

"Bullshit you don't. In case you've forgotten, Nick is supposed to be running my company, not running away for Brokeback with Lewis."

Joel looked embarrassed while James actually smirked.

"Is there something funny about this, James?" Matt 111

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demanded.

"Yeah," said his nurse cockily. "You."

Matt's eyes narrowed. James really did think he could speak to him however he wanted now he was working his notice period.

"So... I should go," Joel spoke up, clearing his throat. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Matt nodded. "See you tomorrow." He put his crutches aside as he perched on the edge of the bed. As Joel went to the door, he said quietly, "Thanks for coming."

Joel smiled before disappearing.

Matt, back turned as he slowly lifted himself to the bed with one strong arm, glared back over his shoulder at James. James came round to face Matt, leaned down and gripped the ankle of the cast to heave it onto the bed as Matt moved back. Matt, sparing another glare, went still as he stared into his nurse's face.

Almost on his knees in front of Matt, James remained still as Matt's eyes swept over his face. He took in every feature as though committing it to memory for a test later on once his nurse had gone.

He examined the pale, flawless skin and the light dusting of freckles over the nose. He looked into the startling mixture of green and blue which made up James'

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eyes. And his gaze lingered on the moist mouth which was slightly parted, showing the white teeth.

Looking up with his own intense perusal of Matt's face, with pupils constricting as the light from the window behind Matt hit them, James said again, "What?" as he had the last time Matt had studied him in such a fashion. This time his voice was quiet, a little unsteady, and he didn't take his eyes from Matt's or his hands from around his ankle.

The air suddenly became close, crackling with some unnamed tension. Matt shook his head. He didn't move to get further onto the bed. James gripped the cast hard, trying to swing Matt's leg up and force him to twist his body around to lie down on the bed.

But Matt wasn't playing. He wanted to remain here on the edge of the bed for the time being, with his nurse on his knees before him while Matt studied his face a little longer. So while James struggled to lift the heavy cast, Matt resisted him until James' force on the leg caused his hands to slip as he stood, and he tumbled forward into Matt.

Matt instinctively reached out to grip James' hips as the man's torso collided with his own, and he found his face buried against his nurse's chest, James standing between his legs.

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For a moment, stunned silence descended and no one moved. Matt's hands were tight on James' slender hips, fingers digging in. His cheek was hot where it pressed into the soft cotton of James' shirt. Beneath it he felt the firm muscle, the hard beating of his nurse's heart.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded suddenly, as though he wasn't the one with his hands clutching James' hips.

James broke abruptly away and turned without looking back. He moved swiftly to the door, and Matt's gaze followed, travelling down the curves of his nurse's lithe, muscular body. The door slammed.

Matt lay slowly back on the bed and dragged his cast up with him. He turned his face into the pillow and imagined he smelled that citrus smell again, even though his bed had been changed. His mind replayed what he had just seen. *No*. His eyes were playing tricks on him. He thought he had seen an obvious bulge in his nurse's pants as he turned away from Matt.

That was what came of getting your libido back when you thought it had gone forever. He imagined things just because he needed to get laid. He felt his groin tighten.

Not now, not here on the bed in the middle of the morning when James could be back any minute. His treacherous 114

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hand moved to palm himself slowly and firmly, and he caught his lip between



his teeth to stifle a moan. He had not done it again since that day in the bathroom, but now he wanted it.

He took his hand away. He tried to shift his thoughts to other things and thought about Nick and Lewis.

Truth be told, he missed the pair of them. Lewis had told James he was only going away for a few days, and yet he hadn't called. But then, Matt hadn't called his friend either, so he was just as bad.

He reached over for his cell and called Nick's office number direct, but it wasn't Nick who picked up. He recognised the voice. "Richard?"

"Hey, Matt." His employee sounded nervous.

"Where's Nick?"

"He's... gone away."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"He's left you in charge?"

"Yes."

As angry as Matt was, he knew Richard was more than capable of this job, as he had been taking charge on Nick's days off anyway.

"How are you?"

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"I'm fine."

"I've been meaning to come see you."

*I bet.* All his employees had been saying this when he called.

He ended the call as soon as he could and located Nick's cell number, connecting and getting sent straight through to voice mail. He hung up without leaving a message. He thought of dialling Lewis, but decided against it. It was very clear now that the two were away together.

He let his cell fall to the bed and looked down at the bulge which still tented his shorts. Fuck it; jerking off was great, but Matt wished he had another hand to do it. He wished he had a willing mouth to go around it. He wished he had an accommodating hole to swallow it up. He wished he had a warm body to curl up next to once he'd done. He groaned and rubbed himself, eyes closed, trying not to let his thoughts stray to how his nurse had been on his knees before him, staring up at him with those constricted pupils in those clear, endlessly turquoise eyes.

He took his cell up again and found a number in his address book. "Joel," he said hesitantly when his friend answered. "I need a favour."

"Go on."

"Can you... get me a woman?"

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"What sort of woman?"

"Come on; don't make this harder than it already is."

He groaned aloud at his own terrible pun, while Joel cackled.

"Right so... a whore?"

"Yeah. But someone... clean you know.

Respectable."

"Sure. High-class."

"Yeah. I'll pay as much as she wants. But..." He hesitated awkwardly. "You'll have to explain to her that I'm... scarred and a cripple. That I won't be up to doing the Kama Sutra. In fact, it'll probably be piss poor."

"Dude, she won't care. If you were getting paid for it, would you care if you got off or not?"

"I've never really thought about it," Matt muttered.

"I have. I'd love to be a whore. It would be so...

rewarding."

"Joel, why don't you shut the fuck up and get your little black book out."

"Yes, boss," Joel said with a laugh. "I'll bring you a nice little something later."

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# Chapter Eleven

Joel brought the woman around at nine after Matt made sure Severine had left for the night and James had gone out. He let himself in with his key and brought the girl up to Matt's room.

Matt sat up a little straighter as she came in, and he saw her face under the glow of the bedside lamp. Joel had done a good job. Of average height, she had a voluptuous figure and breasts which looked real. A slinky black dress hugged every curve invitingly. Very short black hair emphasized her large blue eyes, porcelain skin and red-painted lips.

Matt smiled at her. "Hi there." He held out his hand.

"Matt."

She smiled in return, and he saw the glint of metal in her mouth. She had her tongue pierced. He started to get hard. "Hello." Her gaze flickered momentarily over his scar. "I'm Amber." She took his hand and squeezed it gently.

"I'll leave you to it," Joel said, winking at Matt.

"Thanks, man."

Joel closed the door, and his footsteps retreated down the stairs.

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"So did Joel explain about...?" Matt indicated his cast and his face.

"Sure." Amber shrugged. "It's no big deal. It won't stop us having fun." She was already stepping out of her high-heels. "Want me to undress for you?"

"Yeah."

"Unzip me." She turned her back.

Matt shrugged his left arm out of his sling, put both hands up and unzipped the dress, revealing the smooth curve of Amber's spine.

Amber turned around. The dress slithered into a silky pile around her feet. She stepped out of it. She wore a black strapless bra and the tiniest of lace thongs. Matt remained still, eyes fixed on her body as she shed both items.

Then she crawled onto his bed, astride his hips, drawing the covers back, revealing the tent in his shorts.

"My my," she purred. "You *are* a big boy." Both hands on his shoulders, she leaned in to kiss him.

Matt turned his face away instinctively. He felt her tense up immediately; her eyes going cold as stone. "Oh, I see. You don't kiss whores?"

Matt shook his head. "I don't kiss anyone; it's nothing to do with you."

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She eyed him sceptically. "Just want to dispense with the foreplay then, get right down to it?"

"Yeah."

"Fine." She climbed off the bed and came back with her bag, from which she extracted a condom and a tube of lubricant. She withdrew Matt from his shorts. He caught his breath as she stroked him lightly before rolling the condom down on him. Then as he watched, she squeezed some lubricant onto her fingers and rubbed it between her legs, then over his latex-covered shaft. She braced herself on his right shoulder with one hand, gripped his cock with the other and lowered herself onto it.

Matt sighed in pleasure, his hands gripping her hips.

As he thrust up into her, he felt a sharp ripple of pain along his abdomen and through his pelvis. He gasped and went still.

"What's wrong?" Amber looked down into his face.

"Nothing," he said, teeth clenched. "Carry on."

She started to ride him swiftly, breasts bouncing, hands on his chest, giving theatrical moans of pleasure which did nothing for him. With every movement she made, a wave of agony swept through Matt. She stopped suddenly when she saw his face. "Am I hurting you?"

He shook his head. "Just..." His breathing had 120

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become laboured with pain, and to his horror, he felt his dick starting to soften.

Amber sighed. "I can't do this to you." And she climbed abruptly from him.

With a hiss of frustration, Matt pulled the condom off and hurled it onto the bedside table. Just then he heard footsteps on the landing and a light tap on the door. "You still up, Matt?"

Amber had put the tiny thong back on and stood holding her bra when James appeared in the doorway. His face was quite the picture, gaze flicking from Amber to Matt—who hastily pulled the covers over himself—before he quickly retreated.

Matt cursed. "There's your money. I hope you can see yourself out."

Amber put her shoes on, took the money from the table and her purse and left without a backward glance, zip half open.

On the landing, she paused when she went past James' open bedroom door, and to Matt's utter disbelief, she said softly, "Please could you zip me up?" James came out and did just that, before Amber winked at him and headed downstairs. As the door closed, James turned to look at Matt.

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"Come in here for a minute," Matt called.

James did so hesitantly. He stopped at the foot of Matt's bed. "I'm sorry, I didn't..."

Matt shook his head. "I need some morphine, James," he said, teeth clenched. "Please. I know you don't want me to, but *please*, I'm begging you..."

James didn't argue this time. He moved quickly to the table, opened a syringe and put a needle on the end.

While he drew up the drug, Matt lay with eyes squeezed shut, head arched back against the pillow, face wet with sweat.

James came over with the syringe and sat on the edge of the bed. Only seconds later the drug coursed through his veins and blocked out Matt's physical pain. He found his mental torment remained. He was far more lucid than he wanted to be.

"You shouldn't have seen that," he muttered as James paused with the syringe still connected, to gauge the effect of the morphine.

"It's none of my business. Has the pain gone?"

Matt nodded. James withdrew the syringe and flushed the cannula through with saline.

"I just wanted..." Matt slurred. "I couldn't..." His good hand gripped the covers in utter frustration. "It hurt so

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bad..."

"I know," James said softly. "Lie back. It's okay."

Matt's head fell back, eyes closed. He felt the touch of James' fingertips on his cheek, and he froze. The fingers stroked his scar lightly, tracing its outline. "It's going to be okay."

He tried to move away from the touch but his head seemed too heavy. He lifted eyelids which felt like ton weights to look into eyes which were close to his. James still perched on the edge of his bed.

"It's *not* going to be okay. I wish you could make it better." He clutched at James' wrist, bringing the hand away from his face. Instead Matt pulled it against his chest, over his heart, and his fingers entwined tightly with James'. He looked beseechingly into James' eyes for he knew not what

—some miracle, some salvation— and then he saw what was going to happen.

James leaned closer to him, the hand in his own tightening, his other hand pressing into the pillow beside Matt's head.

And instead of stopping this thing which could not possibly be happening, Matt closed his eyes and let it.

James kissed him softly with a tenderness which took all his breath away in a gasp. He claimed Matt's mouth 123

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like an explorer captures a wild, untamed place, subduing the savage beast within a moment and reducing him to rubble. Like an ocean of sweet tranquillity, his mouth soothed and healed and yet set every cell in Matt's body ablaze with desire.

He had no urge to break away from this. He merely opened his mouth, the better to let their lips fuse into one, each sealing around the other perfectly, no tongues involved, the kiss sweet and gentle, but loaded with suppressed passion. As he did, his arm came up to wrap around James' back and hold the muscular body close to him, feeling no pain as his nurse's torso pressed against his.



Slowly the kiss broke with extreme reluctance on both sides. James lifted his head, and Matt stared up into eyes which must have been the reflection of his own, hazy and dark with lust.

Then James cursed. "Shit. *Fuck*." And the spell was broken.

Matt put his hand out to keep him back as he stood.

"Wait."

James shrugged free. "Go to sleep." He left the room.

Moments later a confused, unhappy Matt slipped into a drugged sleep.

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## Chapter Twelve

Matt awoke when Severine opened his door. Last night immediately came flooding back to him. He remembered the pathetic attempt at sex first and then, horror upon horror, having his nurse lay the smooch upon him. *Oh, Jesus Christ no.*

Severine pushed the table up to the bed with his breakfast. "I don't want it," he muttered.

"Most important meal of the day, Matthew."

Matt lifted his head to see James standing behind her in the doorway.

Severine turned around to look. "Tell him, James.

He needs to eat his breakfast."

"I'm not fucking five years old," Matt growled, immediately regretful at Severine's offended expression. He had never sworn at her before. He sighed. "I'm sorry."

Severine retreated and closed the door.

James approached the bed. He looked as embarrassed as Matt felt.

"About last night." Matt launched straight into it. "I was high on morphine; I didn't know what I was doing..."

He kept his eyes averted. Why did he need to make these excuses when *James* had kissed *him*? *He* hadn't instigated 125

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it; *James* had. What was *his* excuse?

"It never happened," James said quietly.

Matt's gaze moved reluctantly to his, seeing his nurse's discomfort. "Yeah."

James turned away. "I'll be back later." He slipped through the door before Matt could speak again.

Matt raised his bed to a seated position and looked into his cereal bowl. Jesus Christ, he wouldn't kiss the *whore*, the *woman*, but he would kiss his *nurse*, the *man*.

What the fuck was wrong with him? Was he gay? Would his dick have stayed hard if James had been sitting on him?

The thought turned his stomach, and yet the memory of the kiss sent his stomach lurching with some other, less definable feeling than revulsion.

Nick and Lewis turned up later to Matt's surprise.

They were both tanned and both looked happy.

"Hey," Lewis greeted him first, an air of sheepishness about him as he moved towards Matt and embraced him firmly before Matt could draw away.

Matt muttered a greeting, acknowledging Nick, who merely took a chair and looked intently at Matt.

"Been anywhere nice?" he asked, trying to stay calm.

Lewis retreated to sit next to Nick. As he folded his

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hands in his lap, Matt caught the glint of metal on his hand.

Lewis wore a silvery band on the third finger of his left hand. Matt stared. With a churning in his gut, his eyes moved across to Nick's hand, and found an identical ring on Nick's finger.

Matt's eyes snapped away instantly. His thoughts spun crazily. He couldn't even think what this meant.

"Hawaii," Lewis said, exchanging a glance with Nick.

Confused and angry, Matt tried to take some deep breaths. He fixed ice-cold eyes on Nick. "You had no right to just take a holiday like that and leave Richard in charge without discussing it with me."

Nick arched a brow. "Excuse me? I had no *right*?

When I've run your company for months, working fourteen hour days, six days a week, I have no *right* to take a holiday?"

Crushing silence fell between them. Nick was pale with rage. Lewis put a hand on his wrist to calm him, and Matt's lip curled in disgust at the gesture. Nick abruptly stood up. "I'm done here," he told Lewis. "I'll be outside in the car." He strode to the door and slammed it behind him.

Matt's eyes moved unbidden to the ring once again.

He wanted to ask but was too afraid.

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"I thought you might be happy to see us," Lewis said quietly in disappointment.

Matt gave a sigh. "I *am*, Lewis, of course I am."

"Why are you so angry at us? We're still the same people."

"You and Nick... are you... together?"

Lewis nodded.

Matt looked at him hard for a moment as he allowed this news to digest. What had changed Nick's mind when the last Matt had heard, he had fucked Lewis

then walked out on him? Perhaps Matt's angry speech about not playing games with Lewis. Either way, evidently Nick didn't want to play games with Lewis any more, he wanted to get straight down to it.

"And... that?" He indicated Lewis' ring. "Did you guys get... *married* or something?"

Lewis stared at him a moment before he burst out laughing. "No man, it's not legal in Hawaii. Why the fuck would you say that? Don't you think I would invite you to any wedding of mine?"

Matt said nothing, head bowed.

"We just saw the rings. Nick wanted to buy me one, so I said he'd better have one too."

Matt didn't speak. He couldn't imagine anyone 128

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wanting to buy him a ring. Ever.

"Are you okay?"

Matt bit his lip. "I missed you," he said in a low voice. This was a big confession. Matt was not prone to spouting things like this.

"Shit, man," Lewis reached over, took Matt's hand and squeezed it. "I missed you too. Nick missed you."

Matt looked up into Lewis' eyes. He left his hand where it was. "Really?" he asked like a hopeful child.

"Really." Lewis smiled tenderly. "We were talking about the night out we're going to have when you get out of plaster."

"Lewis, if that night ever comes, and right now it feels like it won't, I'm going to be so drunk you'll have to take me straight back to hospital."

Lewis grinned. "And how are you getting on with James now?"

Matt's face fell. "The sooner he goes the better," he said in a conspiratorial whisper as though his nurse had bugged his bedroom. "He doesn't even speak to me anymore."

"Are you sure it's not the other way around?" Lewis asked with a raised eyebrow. "He's a polite guy. And I know what you're like."

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"Meaning?"

"Meaning I bet you're doing your best to make his last few days here hell."

Matt glared. "Ouch, Lewis, that hurts." Then he smirked.

Lewis laughed. "Evil bastard. When's he going anyway?"

"Tomorrow's his last day."

"And have you found anyone to replace him?"

Matt shook his head.

Lewis looked at him sternly. "Well then, I better get myself one of those kinky rubber uniforms, seeing as it looks like I'm going to be your unpaid nurse."

Matt smiled. He wasn't going to be alone after all when James left.

Lewis stood and squeezed Matt's shoulder. "I'll call you tomorrow."

Matt nodded. "Bye. And Lewis, tell Nick I'm sorry."

"Sure." Lewis closed the door behind him.

He should be telling Nick that himself. He had never been so disgusted with

himself at how he had spoken to Nick, after the man had worked himself into the ground managing his company while Matt recovered. He would have to make it up to him somehow.

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Joel arrived at eight with cartons of Chinese food, beer, and a pile of DVDs. Matt was out of bed, sitting in his chair and reading a magazine. At least, pretending to, while his mind replayed the kiss in heart-stopping clarity and his lips burned for more.

"How did it go, man?" Joel asked with a grin like the Cheshire cat.

Matt felt his face redden. "I've had better."

"Shit, man. I had a guarantee she was the hottest fuck ever. Did you get your money back?"

"I don't think it works like that."

"It fucking should. You got off though, right?"

Matt remained silent.

"Right then. We'd better open the beers."

\* \* \* \*

It was a good evening. The tension between the two of them dissipated with every beer, until finally Matt confessed that it had hurt too much to get bounced up and down on the night before, and he'd had to abort the attempt.

He stopped short of mentioning how the night had taken a turn for the better later on.

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Joel took it without too much smirking and even seemed to be sympathetic. He suggested Matt give it a couple of weeks and then he would bring someone else around.

Matt assented, but had no intention of allowing someone else to see him so humiliated and vulnerable ever again. He'd have to use his hand until he got his cast off and he could go and find his own sexual partners.

Long after Joel had gone and Matt had brushed his teeth and climbed into bed, he lay wide awake. His mind refused to leave James alone. He dwelled on the erection James had sported when the two had accidentally collided the previous day, and then he dwelled even further on the feel of velvet-soft lips against his. A man's lips. James had said he wasn't gay. Matt most definitely wasn't gay, even though all those around him were. Maybe it was rubbing off on him. Or could it be a type of Stockholm Syndrome?

*If you're around someone all day with no other company when you're at your most vulnerable, maybe you become attached to that person; maybe you start to desire them.*

But he didn't desire James. He *didn't*. James kissed *him*. And you *let* him, a sly voice replied. *You opened your mouth and invited him to take it.*

His gaze moved to the bedside table and his cell.

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James had not reappeared since dinner, and it was after two in the morning now. He reached over for the cell and called up James' number from the address book, hesitating a moment before connecting to it. It rang three times before James picked up.



"Hello." Soft music played in the background.

"Did I wake you?" Matt lay back in bed, eyes closed, already feeling more soothed.

"No. What's wrong?"

"I wondered, am I prescribed any sleeping pills?"

"No. Can't you sleep? I thought you would have been well away by now. There was a lot of laughing going on, it sounded like a good night."

Suddenly an ache began in Matt's chest. He felt unaccountably sorry for his nurse. This man who had spent all his life more or less alone, felt sorry for someone else.

He couldn't even begin to explain away his own feelings.

All he knew was that James had been sitting alone in his room down the hall while Matt and Joel got drunk.

"You should have joined us."

"I don't think so," James replied softly. "I'm hardly a friend of yours, am I, Matt?"

A long, painful silence lingered while the ache in Matt's chest grew and the lump in his throat intensified.

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"James..."

"I've got some herbal sleeping pills if you want them," James interrupted him quickly.

"Okay."

"Give me two minutes." James disconnected abruptly.

Matt put his cell back on the table. He lay looking at the ceiling with the blood surging through his veins at double the speed it had before he picked up the phone.

A tap came at the door before it opened. James wore a T-shirt and pyjama bottoms and was bare-foot. He moved over to the bed, his skin soft and pale in the subdued light from the bedside lamp. He held his hand out as he reached Matt, palm open, revealing two oval tablets.

Matt shuffled up a little and reached over to his bedside table for the glass of water which sat there. When he tried to pluck the tablets from James' hand, he was clumsy with drink, and his fingertips fumbled several times against the soft skin of James' palm before James smiled.

"Here." He reached out to Matt's mouth, holding one tablet between index finger and thumb.

Matt parted his lips. James' fingers scraped against his teeth and touched his tongue as he placed the tablet on it. Matt took a drink of water quickly, swallowing the 134

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tablet, and then he obediently opened his mouth for the second.

James' fingers deposited the second tablet. As they did, Matt's tongue lifted and ran lightly over both fingers.

James drew back his hand quickly and stepped away from the bed abruptly, a little flushed.

"Good night. See you in the morning."

Matt nodded mutely, sliding back down in bed. He heard James' bedroom door close and he lay waiting for sleep. What exactly had he just done?

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## Chapter Thirteen

"Seeing as you still haven't hired another nurse, I've brought David to fill in for me." James entered the room with a short, auburn-haired man in tow.

Matt sat up, a little shocked and discomfited at having a stranger in his room.

"Hi," the man said, approaching Matt, dark eyes fixed on his, hand held out. He screamed gay.

Matt controlled his manners. He muttered a hello and took the hand with distaste, his gaze on James.

"I'm just going to hand over your care to him,"

James said, "if that's okay."

Matt didn't comment. He reached for the remote and tried to drown the two out with *Fuse* as they spoke about Matt as though he wasn't there. James gave David a thorough run down of drugs, dressings, mobility, observations, and other things which were spoken about too quietly for Matt to hear. James had no right to bring another nurse here without Matt's permission, and he quietly seethed, waiting for the right moment to get James alone.

"I hope you haven't forgotten your appointment at the fracture clinic today," James addressed Matt finally.

Matt shook his head, keeping his eyes on the TV.

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"It's at one, I'll take you there."

"It's fine. I'll get a ride off Lewis."

"I'm still working for you, Matt. I'll take you."

Matt shrugged. "Whatever."

When he glanced over, he saw James and David exchanging a look which infuriated him. He glared at David until the interloper became uncomfortable enough to mutter his excuses and leave, leaving James to Matt's wrath.

"Told him how difficult I am, have you?"

"Obviously," James replied coolly. "He likes a challenge. That's why he's here."

"I don't fucking want him, and you shouldn't have brought him. I don't want you to take me to the hospital. I can manage. You can finish work *now* as far as I'm concerned."

"Not going to happen." James remained unruffled.

"I'm here until this evening. Be ready at twelve fifteen." He turned and left abruptly.

By twelve ten, Matt had dressed, the sling on his left arm discarded, and had managed to navigate himself slowly to his walk-in closet next door to find shoes for the first time since his accident. He pulled out two Nikes which had been brand new at the time of the crash, then cursed 137

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and put the left one back.

Holding the shoe by its laces in his mouth, he made his way back out to the landing and almost collided with James who was coming around the corner from his own room.

"You ready?" His nurse reached out and removed the shoe from his mouth. Matt nodded, turned and made his way back into his bedroom. He sat in a chair and held his hand out for his Nike.

James gave it to him and Matt put it on, putting his foot up on the edge of the chair to lace it up. Then he followed James back out onto the landing and came to a halt at the top of the stairs. "Fuck it," he cursed in dismay.

His stairs were an extravagant spiral affair, snaking up from the entrance hall. From this angle they seemed strange, as though he couldn't remember the world on the other side of them.

"On your backside," directed James.

"I'm sorry?" Matt lifted an eyebrow.

"Give me your crutches. You need to slide down on your backside."

"How dignified." Matt handed his crutches over, sank down on the top step and shuffled over the edge until he had his right foot on the step below, his cast sticking out 138

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in the air.

James moved past him and descended a few steps in front of him then turned to face Matt and waited. Using his right hand to propel him down, Matt bumped down the first step. He looked up at James supervising him. How humiliating was this? He lowered his head and bumped down another couple of steps.

"Are you okay?" James put his hand on Matt's right knee, exposed in the shorts he wore. The contact seemed to sear Matt's skin.

"Get off me," he hissed.

James abruptly turned and descended the stairs swiftly. There he left Matt's crutches propped against the banister and went to the front door. Wrenching it open, he stepped outside.

Still sliding down the stairs, Matt was contrite.

Sunlight spilled onto the marble floor of the entrance hall and the smell of flowers from his garden drifted in through the open door. He reached the bottom of the stairs and dragged himself up via the banister, took the crutches and moved to the door. Outside, James stood by a black Audi, holding the passenger door open.

Matt made his way over to him. "I'm sorry," he muttered as James took his crutches from him. Matt 139

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gripped the roof of the car with his good hand and swivelled around to perch his backside onto the seat. Both legs still outside, he looked up at his nurse.

James shrugged. "It's not as though I don't know you don't like being touched. I should know better. I'll be out of your hair soon enough."

He waited until Matt gripped his cast and swung it into the car before he slammed the door and went around to the other side. When he started the engine, the stereo came on loud —Guns N' Roses— and James spun the wheels on the gravelled drive, setting off at an angry pace.

Matt became white-knuckled within moments. He had never expected his first trip in a car to bring back unpleasant memories, but it did. As James shot out onto the main road and put his foot down, Matt leaned his head back, one hand gripping the handle on his door, eyes closed. He didn't think James malicious enough to be driving this way to deliberately scare him, more likely his anger at Matt had finally found an outlet. Matt was in the grip of a panic-attack for the first time in his life, and he couldn't control it.

He told himself he was a pussy, that he enjoyed driving fast as much as the next man —hell, one of the primary causes of his accident had been speed— and that  
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there was no reason to be afraid of travelling as a passenger now, but it made no difference.

James cursed and abruptly took his foot off the accelerator. He touched the brake slowly and cruised to the side of the road. After coming to a stop, he switched the engine off. Matt didn't move or open his eyes.

"Shit, I'm sorry," James said softly. "You're hyperventilating; slow your breathing down."

Matt lifted his lashes and glanced sideways at James. Slowly his hand uncurled from its death grip on the door handle.

"Come on." James' voice was gentle as though he coaxed a frightened animal. His hand moved to Matt's left hand. With the lightest of touches, his fingertips brushed Matt's fingers.

Matt didn't tell James to get his hands off him.

Instead his fingers moved to grip James', and he held onto them as though his nurse was salvation. His eyes beseeched James the way they had on the night James had kissed him.

Slowly, in the shocking silence, James leaned forward. He cupped the back of Matt's head and stroked his hair. "It's okay," he said in a whisper. "I promise."

Matt stared into James' aquamarine eyes, his breathing slowing, and once more he remained still as 141

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James moved closer. Once more he allowed his eyes to fall shut and waited for the touch of lips on his.

It never came. James released his head. Matt lifted his lashes in confusion to see James sat back in his seat, staring straight ahead through the window with his jaw clenched tight.



What an idiot he was. What must James think of him? But he was angry, too, at James for leading him on.

What a tease. He knew Matt wanted it; he must have got off on that fact. He stared ahead with his fists clenched.

James started the engine and pulled slowly away from the kerb, taking it easy this time.

"So listen," he spoke finally after some minutes'

uncomfortable silence. "I want you to prepare yourself for the fact that your cast might not come off today. I wouldn't want you to get your hopes up."

"Do I look like the kind of guy to ever get my hopes up about anything?"

James' gaze flickered to his.

"Watch the road."

The two were silent until James pulled up in the hospital car park and went around to open Matt's door. Matt got himself out, ignoring James' arm when he offered his help. James shut the door and set off at a slow pace to the 142

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entrance, waiting for Matt to catch up.

"You can go now," Matt told him when they reached the main doors.

James frowned. "I'll walk you up and wait outside."

Matt shook his head. "It's fine. I'll get a ride back from Lewis or one of the others."

"Matt, I brought you here. I'm going to take you home."

"No. I told you. I don't need you." The words were symbolic. Matt wasn't really just referring to his ride home, and James knew it.

His nurse bristled visibly. "You are one stubborn fucking bastard," he muttered under his breath. "I'll be around to say bye later." He turned away.

"Why don't you say bye now," Matt said flippantly behind him, always needing the last word. "And get your stuff moved out while I'm here."

For the briefest of moments, James looked hurt.

Then his eyes narrowed, and his face turned cold as ice.

"And I said I'll see you later. I don't finish working for you until this evening, Matt." He walked away.

The appointment went as James said it might. The orthopaedic surgeon wasn't happy with the X-rays of Matt's femur and decided it would need to remain in plaster for 143

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another few weeks. Matt kept his face neutral and nodded at all the right places during the explanation, while inside, he howled. His pelvis looked good though, as did his clavicle. He didn't need to wear the sling anymore.

When he hopped out into the sunshine on his crutches, it occurred to him he could work out the upper part of his body that evening, although somehow he doubted his ribs and pelvis would be agreeable to the idea.

He took out his cell and dialled Lewis' number.

"Hey," his friend answered.

"Hey, man. Listen, can I get a ride home off you?"

"Where are you?"

"At the hospital."

"Did you get your cast off?"

"No." For a moment Matt's voice quavered. He clenched his fist, eyes squeezed shut.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Shit, man, I'm in the middle of a meeting. Who took you there?"

"James but... it doesn't matter. I'll get a cab."

"No, don't do that. Look, I'm not far away. Give me twenty minutes. I'll be there, okay?"

"Okay, thanks, man." Matt hung up. He bowed his

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head and put a hand over his eyes to mask his face from passers-by while he got control of himself.

Lewis arrived in fifteen minutes. He walked slowly beside Matt back to his car and opened the door for him.

"Why did James leave you?"

"I told him to. I didn't want him here."

"Fuck it, what the hell's wrong with you? He's your nurse. He's been so good for you. I don't understand..."

Matt whirled furiously around, overbalancing on his crutches and almost falling. He caught hold of Lewis' wing-mirror with one desperately clutching hand. "He *kissed* me," he yelled, oblivious to passers-by. "Okay? That's why he's fucking going."

Lewis' face was a picture, his mouth open in utter astonishment, eyes wide and staring. "What?"

"You fucking *heard* me, Lewis. The night before you and Nick came around. He kissed me."

Lewis' eyes were like two saucers. "Did you... *want* him to kiss you?"

Matt lowered his head. "You don't get to ask me that," he muttered, climbing into the car.

Getting back up the stairs proved to be even harder and there was no sign of James. As soon as Matt got back into his bedroom, he asked Lewis to leave. Now that he had 145

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made his confession, he couldn't bear to look his friend in the face.

"Any time you want to talk," Lewis said softly as he left.

Matt lay down on the bed with a lump in his throat and his eyes burning. The conflicting emotions raging within him frightened him. He wanted to see his nurse right now. He wanted the calm, comforting presence of James in his room. He wanted his sympathetic eyes and his soothing touch. All he had left was a few short hours of this, and it wasn't enough. He was beginning to think it would never be enough.

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## Chapter Fourteen

Darkness cloaked the room when Matt awoke to something brushing his arm. He opened his eyes slowly to see James sitting on the edge of the bed. His nurse reached out with gloved hands for the sticky dressing which held Matt's cannula in place. "I'm taking this out. You're done with your IVs now."

Matt didn't reply. This was it. This was goodbye.

He winced as James ripped the dressing off without preamble, taking a layer of hair with it.

"Always better to do it quick," James remarked, removing the cannula and pressing a piece of gauze hard to the site when it immediately bubbled up with blood.

"If you're a sadist," Matt replied sardonically.

James' eyes moved to his. He held Matt's gaze steadily.

Matt wished he knew what his nurse had been thinking when he had almost kissed him again and instead made Matt look a fool. He wished he had the balls to ask him.

James lifted the gauze to check on the bleeding, and the blood continued to ooze out. He replaced it and sat staring past Matt out the window, deliberately avoiding his gaze now.

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"James," Matt said quietly so James had no choice but to look at him.

Matt had nothing to say. Nothing which would allow itself to be heard anyway.

James pressed a piece of tape over the gauze and stood up quickly, discarding his gloves. He rubbed his hands with some alcohol gel then gathered his notes up neatly into a pile. Finally, with his back turned, he took a deep breath, seeming to be gathering his composure.

He turned around, his face too carefully blank, his eyes revealing nothing. "I'm leaving now."

An ache made itself known deep down inside. Matt tried to keep his own expression the same. He would not give James the satisfaction of knowing this hurt. James stood over him, his hand held out.

Matt ignored it, regarding James with cool, arrogant disinterest, as though he couldn't give less of a shit. Matt often thought he should have been an actor because his talent was legendary.

"You're not going to shake my hand?" James said quietly.

"No I'm not going to shake your hand. You've left me in the lurch."

James sighed. "You know why I have to go. I *know* 148

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that you know."

Their eyes met. Matt remained silent.

"Come on, for an intelligent man, you act so stupidly most of the time. You're so *wilfully* blind to everything going on around you, and yet I *know* that you know deep down what's going on."

Matt kept quiet. His guts churned, and his heart roared in his chest.

"Jesus." James looked ready to grab hold of Matt and shake him. "One of your friends fucks guys regularly, and you pretend you know nothing. Your best friend has been in love with your other friend for God knows how long and again, you're oblivious. You can bury your head in the sand for as long as you

want, Matt, but you don't fool me. You have *never* fooled me. I read you like a goddamn book and not a very good book at that. And if you won't say why I have to go, then I'll say it for you. Because of the other night."

Matt's face burned. "That was an accident," he mumbled with eyes averted.

"Oh right," James scoffed. "My lips accidentally collided with yours. *Come on!* Grow up. It nearly happened again this afternoon."

That James would actually mention it was more 149

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than Matt could bear. He thought he would sink through the bed and the floor and deep into the bowels of the earth with humiliation. "You need to go right now," he growled.

"Yeah, don't I just," James retorted. "Because you can't handle talking about any difficult subject can you?"

Whether it be your near death, your gay friends, or the fact that you fucking *loved* me kissing you and wanted more today."

Matt took a deep intake of shocked breath. "Get out now." He grabbed his cast with both hands, trying to swing it quickly off the bed, his thoughts only going one way: to hit James.

"Stay where you are," James said scornfully. "David is under strict instructions to wean you off the morphine, so you won't be getting any from him after hurting yourself trying to kill me." He moved to the door. "Bye, Matt. It's been... interesting."

Matt cast wildly around for an object to throw, and snatched a glass from his bedside table. He hurled it after James where it struck the doorframe and shattered into a hundred pieces.

He fell back onto the bed, chest heaving, hands curled into the fists he longed to drive into James' face. As he lay there he heard a car start below, the sound of its

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engine retreating down the driveway until silence fell once more.

This was the end. James had gone, and Matt could move on. He could put away all those confusing thoughts and those wild ideas. Instead he felt like a plant which had been placed in the sunshine it craved and grown tall and strong, only to be returned to the darkness with its source of life removed.

Oh Jesus, what was he supposed to do now? He lay with a hand pressed across his eyes as though this somehow could block out his thoughts. He felt so achingly tired, so utterly broken of spirit.

As he lay there, he wished he had died in the accident.

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# Chapter Fifteen

## *Two months later*

Matt surveyed himself in the mirror. His black clothes only seemed to highlight his ghostly pallor and the coldness of his deep green eyes. His dark hair was freshly cut and severely short, which made those eyes seem huge and drew far too much attention to them for his liking. He tried not to see the scar, an impossible feat when it snaked down from his ear to his mouth.

He had asked David for a mirror a week after James had left, and he had sat looking at himself for over half an hour until he couldn't take any more. The reflection only confirmed what he already knew — no one would ever want him again. Apart from James, who had seemed to want him at one point despite everything, and whom Matt had made sure would never come back.

Apart from hospital appointments, it was the first time he had left his house since his accident. Anxiety twisted his stomach, but he would not admit that to himself.

He longed to fast forward through the walk downstairs, the ride to Lewis', the greeting of his friends, their eyes surveying him and mentally telling themselves whether he 152

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looked good or like shit. He longed to fast forward a few hours to a Matt slumped in the corner of a bar, wasted beyond endurance. Because there was no doubt he was going to drink tonight until he passed out or died. All he wanted was to get drunk. He wanted to forget that something seemed to be missing, that he ached for every single day with no respite.

Lewis picked him up in his BMW at eight thirty. It had been agreed that the four of them would meet up at Lewis' place for a drink and then get a cab into town.

Nick and Joel were already at Lewis', and they greeted Matt enthusiastically, Joel cat-calling and telling him he looked hot, while Matt growled at him to shut up.

"But seriously, man," Nick said. "You look good."

Matt didn't think he looked remotely good. He was pale and sickly looking, conscious of the limp which he would have for the rest of his life, of the biceps which were not as firm as previously, of the left leg which now had less muscle definition than the right and looked decidedly odd to him. He ached if he walked too far. In fact, he just ached in general, all over, twenty-four seven. He constantly rang his doctor to tell him his painkillers weren't working. He wasn't sure if this ache was real or just in his mind, and neither was his doctor.

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He felt Nick had to be mocking him by telling him he looked good. He accepted his first alcoholic drink from Lewis since the night he had drunk beer with Joel—a glass of wine—and gulped half of it in one. Lewis topped it up with a smile which seemed to read him far too deeply.

In the bar later, Matt was on a mission to get as wasted as possible while still being able to get it up for the right woman. Unfortunately, he couldn't find the right woman. They were all so orange, so blonde, so... plastic.

He scanned every woman in the bar between twenty-one and forty and found them all wanting. Even shifting the goal-posts to include every woman in the place didn't help.

He didn't want to go home with any of these women. His thoughts wandered. He glanced over at Nick and Lewis and found them deep in conversation. They stood close to each other, staring into the other's eyes, and although they weren't touching, their body language spoke volumes, their manner excluding everyone else in the room.

Matt's attention turned to Joel, who was talking to a girl. How did Joel decide when he wanted a man and when he wanted a woman anyway? Joel had already

told him, hadn't he? A man when he wanted cheap, dirty, hard sex.

Was that all you got with a guy? Would James be like that?

His thoughts horrified him.

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Nick touched his arm, voice loud over the music.

"You okay?"

Matt nodded, shrinking back a little from the touch.

Nick removed his hand with a little roll of his eyes.

"Want another?" He indicated Matt's near-empty bottle.

Matt nodded.

The silence dragged on for a few minutes after Nick had gone before Lewis spoke. "Listen to me. You've made a good recovery. At least physically. Mentally is another story. You're not doing well in that department, are you?"

"I'm doing just fine," Matt replied frostily.

"I don't think you are. I think you're missing something you need. Something which helped you out and which you threw away."

Matt frowned at him. He didn't like the way this conversation was going, not at all. "And what would that be?" He glowered.

"James," Lewis said.

Matt attempted to walk away, but Lewis grabbed his arm forcefully, holding him in place.

"I know you don't want to hear this, but I'm going to tell you anyway. Nick and I have seen James socially a few times since he quit. He told me the reason why he really left and not just because he kissed you either."

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Matt felt his face flame and wished the ground would swallow him up. He kept his head down, gaze on his shoes.

"The reason was, and I quote him here," Lewis went on. "*I feel a little too much for him.*"

Matt's head snapped up. He stared at Lewis, trying to read his sincerity in his eyes.

"The reason I'm telling you this is that I'm really hoping you'll act on it."

Matt opened and closed his mouth, unable to formulate words. Just then, Nick returned with the drinks.

Matt took his bottle of beer and drank down a large gulp.

"What's up?" Nick asked, looking from one to the other.

"I've told him," Lewis said simply.

Nick knew what he meant immediately, Matt observed, so the two had clearly been discussing dropping this bombshell on him. "About time. Now why don't you give him a call?"

Matt shook his head slowly. "I don't know what sordid thoughts you two are cooking up in your nasty little brains, but you've got it all wrong. If James had some sort of unprofessional crush on his patient, that's his problem. I assure you, it wasn't reciprocated."

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Lewis sighed. "You're still in denial man, aren't you? About everything. About your accident, about your feelings for James..."

"I don't have feelings for James," Matt ground out between his teeth. "You need to stop right fucking now, Lewis. Just because you've decided you like to take it up the ass, don't try and convert the rest of us."

Nick's hand shot out so fast Matt never saw it coming. His bottle flew from his hand and smashed on the ground as Nick grabbed him by the front of his shirt and propelled him backwards into the wall. Matt heard Lewis cry out for Nick to stop as he stared down into his friend's livid dark eyes in shock.

"You take that back right now, you fucking shit,"

Nick hissed. "I ever hear you speak that way again to him, so help me..."

"Don't please," Lewis pleaded, hands on Nick's wrists, trying to drag him back. "It doesn't matter. Come on, we're going to get thrown out..."

"It matters," Nick spat, addressing Matt. "It fucking *matters*". He let go of Matt abruptly and stalked away in the direction of the bathrooms.

Matt smoothed his shirt down and avoided Joel's astonished gaze, instead locking gazes with Lewis. "I'm 157

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sorry," he said quietly. Lewis didn't speak, only set off after Nick.

Matt retreated to a couch at the back of the bar where he could drown his sorrows alone. Joel glanced at him, but evidently decided he needed to leave him be.

Clearly he wasn't in the mood for homophobic pearls of wisdom that night either.

Nick had wanted to do that for months. The only reason he hadn't done it before was that it wasn't a fair fight with a bedbound guy. He could count himself lucky Nick had stopped where he had, because Matt knew deep down he deserved it.

He squeezed his eyes shut, leaning forward between his knees and taking some deep breaths, trying to order his thoughts and trying to shut out the clamour of a voice telling him what he must do.

It didn't work though. Because he knew for the first time that he must listen to this voice, finally, for the sake of his own sanity. He got abruptly to his feet, almost stumbling when it hit him just how drunk he was. Ignoring Joel, who looked over questioningly, he headed for the bathroom as quickly as he could with his limp. The rational part of his mind told him he shouldn't be intruding here, that he was going to see or hear something private, something he really didn't want to witness, but he couldn't 158

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wait.

He pushed open the door and found the bathroom empty. Instantly noises assailed his ears, coming from a locked cubicle a few feet away. Soft moans and low-pitched groans accompanied the rattle of the wall, together with a few curses of delight and a gasp of " *Lewis...*"

"Lewis," Matt said loudly outside the door.

There were two different gasps on the other side of the door, then silence.

"Matt," Nick spoke finally. "This really isn't a good time." His friend slurred his words ever so slightly, not half as drunk as Matt was.

Matt ignored him. "Lewis. I need James' address.

*Please.*" A hand fumbled his cell out of his pocket, knowing he was just drunk enough to forget the address as soon as he heard it.

Lewis murmured a street name and number that Matt quickly typed into his

phone.

"Thanks." He flipped the cell shut and replaced it in his pocket. "Carry on," he said, exiting the bathroom.

He moved with purpose through the club. Outside on the sidewalk in the balmy night air, Matt had indeed already forgotten the address and glanced at it again to refresh his memory. There were no cabs in sight, but he 159

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knew the street, barely fifteen minutes walk from here. He could do that.

His inactive, abused body complained within minutes of setting off, his limp growing more pronounced, his legs and pelvis aching fiercely. Matt slowed his pace right down. He tried to think about what he was doing and realised he didn't actually know and wouldn't know until he got there and saw what he needed to see. When he had to slow his pace even further and an easy walk turned into a hike of epic proportions, Matt fumed at the betrayal of his body.

By the time he reached the street, a quiet cul-de-sac on a hill, his lungs burned and his legs wobbled. Slowly, he approached the house which stood alone at the end; a modest detached with a tidy, pretty garden, the Audi parked outside, and the windows darkened.

So to add insult to injury, he would now be waking James up. He made his way tortuously up the drive and climbed the two huge steps to the front door. James' house wasn't disabled friendly. Even Matt's fist was weak as he knocked on the frosted glass of the front door and immediately turned his back, heart pounding sickeningly.

He waited a good couple of minutes with no desire to knock again before a light came on. A few moments later 160

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a key turned in the lock and the door swung open. Matt turned slowly around with that racing heart now firmly lodged in his mouth.

Bare-foot, his hair tousled, James appeared, dressed in a T-shirt and boxers. He looked astonished. "Matt," he groaned. "It's two o'clock, and you're drunk."

"I know," Matt replied urgently. "Now let me in."

James stood back, a wary expression on his face, and allowed Matt to enter. Matt moved down the dark hall and into a small living room decorated and furnished in pale colours. Filmy voiles opened over French windows; moonlight spilled over a large garden.

An odd shiver snaked down Matt's spine as James flicked on a lamp, softly illuminating the room. Here in this modest yet beautiful room, he felt *home*. His legs were suddenly even weaker.

"I'll make some coffee," James said behind him, almost startling Matt in the silence. He nodded, then sank gratefully down onto the sofa as soon as James exited the room. But he couldn't be still as he heard James clattering in the kitchen.

He stood again and moved to the windows. Light from the kitchen illuminated a patio with a table and two chairs, pots spilling over with purple flowers, and a lawn

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sloping down to a fishpond. A sudden ache settled in the middle of Matt's chest at this evidence of James' life.

His mind might have been sluggish with alcohol, but not so much that he couldn't identify at least one of the emotions coursing through him — jealousy. He was jealous of this house, of James' life, his apparent comfort and happiness without Matt, when Matt had mourned his loss like an amputated limb, no matter how he had tried to deny this to himself.

For a moment he saw himself sitting in one of those chairs, watching fish in the



pond, feeling the sun on his face. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself to get a grip, confused and hurting and wishing he had never come here. The light over the garden disappeared as James exited the kitchen, and a moment later, Matt heard his footsteps behind him. He turned around, trying to arrange his features into a blank expression and saw James under the light, close up, for the first time in weeks.

He looked pale, dark circles under his eyes, his hair startlingly black against the alabaster of his skin and tousled, spiked in some areas, crushed by sleep in others.

He was also more stunning than Matt remembered. Fresh from bed, his beauty was breath-taking. Matt's hands became damp. He needed to leave, right now, before things 162

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got even more confusing.

But James held out a mug, aquamarine eyes fixed on his, expression solemn. Matt accepted it with a murmured thanks and took a gulp, burning his mouth. He welcomed the pain as a diversion from this stupor he appeared to be in.

"Want to tell me why you're here, Matt?" James asked quietly. He held a glass of some red liquid, perhaps cranberry juice. Matt guessed he hoped to get back to bed once he had gotten rid of his troublesome visitor and didn't want caffeine to keep him awake.

Matt put his drink on a coaster on the coffee table and moved again to the windows, putting his back to James. He remained silent for a long, long while as he tried to formulate an answer to James' question, and came up empty-handed every time. Because the truth was, he didn't know. He could not put into words the thoughts which tumbled through his mind.

"I had to see you," he said finally.

"Why?"

Matt fumbled for an answer. "I just had to ask you one question. When you said I had not one single redeeming quality, did you mean that?"

James let out a low groan. "Don't."

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Matt turned to face him. "Don't? So you didn't mean it?"

"Of course I didn't mean it."

"So I *do* have one redeeming quality then?"

James stayed silent.

"You can't even think of one, can you? You did mean it after all."

"I can," James said. "And I didn't."

"So what is it?"

"What?"

"My one redeeming quality. What is it?"

James hesitated, staring deep into Matt's eyes. In a low voice he said, "You're hot."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

Matt stared at him. His heart started to beat so hard in his chest it was almost painful. "I'm *hot*?" he repeated.

James nodded. A wash of colour stood starkly on his pale cheeks. He clutched his glass with both hands.

Matt began to tremble. "Lewis told me... what you said about me."

James' gaze lowered. "He shouldn't have. It was supposed to be confidential."

Matt didn't speak. The feelings within him 164

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intensified. The ache in his chest grew more pronounced, his palms became clammy and goose-pimples broke out along the length of his exposed arms. He jammed his hands in his pockets because they fidgeted anxiously with a life of their own.

"Tell me, Matt," James spoke up again, "if Lewis hadn't told you that, would you have come here one day anyway?"

Matt reached deep down inside himself for the answer. When he found it, he wasn't sure he could share it with James. He didn't know how he could let James so deeply inside him. He moved to the couch and sank down on its edge, head lowered, hands dangling between his knees.

Almost reluctantly, he nodded in assent to James'

question. His treacherous mouth opened and spoke the truth in his heart before he could stop it. "I can't forget you. I don't *want* to forget you."

As soon as the words left his mouth, he felt like a millstone had been lifted from around his neck. He had made his confession, and now he was at ease. He looked up slowly, almost relieved, to find James watching him intently.

Placing his glass on the coffee table, he moved 165

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towards Matt, who looked up at him almost fearfully.

Slowly, James sank down in front of him with his hands braced on Matt's knees.

Matt flinched and trembled even more at the contact. His chest tight, he realised he was holding his breath as he stared at the man kneeling in front of him.

He watched James' lips move, but it took him a while to process the words.

"Do you want to stay tonight?"

"What?" He wasn't sure he had heard and interpreted the question correctly. Maybe James meant for him to have a drink with him then crash on the couch?

Surely that was what he meant? His palms were wet, and his heart thumped as though it would break through his ribcage. He smelled the familiar scent of James. The heat of his hands burned him through the knees of his pants.

James didn't repeat himself; he merely regarded Matt questioningly as Matt mentally flailed, feeling like he was being sucked beneath dark, delicious waves of temptation.

Temptation which could only lead him straight to hell.

He understood the question now. As naive as he pretended to be, he understood exactly what James wanted 166

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from him. He was appalled and disgusted that his ex-nurse would be so bold, so up front with his desires, so cheap and easy, as though he wanted to make Matt the fuck buddy Joel had talked about.

"No." He knocked James' hands from his knees and stood abruptly.

"Matt," James said, as Matt stalked to the door.

"Don't." Matt wrenched it open and stepped outside.

"I don't know what you thought I came here for tonight, but you've got it all wrong. It wasn't for *that*. I don't need you to offer yourself to me like some sort of slut." He turned around as he spat out these words and instantly regretted

them when he saw James' face.

He had hurt him, really hurt him, and he ached even more with guilt and remorse. He bolted down the steps and onto the drive as fast as his aching, abused limbs would allow him. As he reached the street, he heard the door slam resoundingly behind him. He set off up the street, but only made it a few yards before he stumbled to a stop, clutching hard at someone's garden wall and sucking in deep breaths, willing his pounding heart to slow. He squeezed his eyes shut, his words lying heavy and bitter in his mouth.

*You're a liar. You're a filthy liar after you called him that when he only wants the same as you do. Wanting* 167

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you doesn't make him cheap, it just makes him a fool for wanting someone as vile as you. Despite everything you've done and said to him and despite your scars, he *wants* you.

His hands curled into fists, his temper simmering just below the surface. He longed to slam them repeatedly into the wall, but by some miracle he controlled himself, remembering what it felt like to have a limb in plaster. His nails dug into his palms, and he trembled, biting the inside of his mouth until he tasted blood. None of this rage was directed at James, even though it had been a moment ago, only at himself. He had never loathed himself more than he did at this moment.

"I can't," he said aloud, even as he half turned back in the direction of James' house. "I *can't*..."

But his mind plunged ahead of him unheeded. He smelled James on him, felt his skin under his hands. He tasted his mouth. He tried to banish these images even as his body betrayed him and he started to grow hard.

His feet began to move him back towards James'

house unbidden, and he was lost. He felt nauseous as he climbed the steps back to the front door, alcohol trying to claw its way back up his oesophagus. He

knocked and stood with head bowed, hands still clenched hard into fists, heart racing and sweat prickling his spine. He didn't even 168

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know what he was going to say or do when James answered the door. The house was dark again, but after only a few seconds a shape became visible through the glass and James opened the door.

"What do you want?" he demanded coldly. "I don't..."

Matt pushed the door open forcefully, cutting him off. James stumbled back, leaving him enough room to step into the house, where he gripped James by the back of the neck and kissed him hard.

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## Chapter Sixteen

James let out a noise of shocked protest as their lips collided and tried to fight him. Matt pinned him to the wall; held his wrists above his head with a strength he didn't know he still possessed and kissed him thoroughly.

James melted within moments under Matt's determination and returned his kiss, so soft, so warm, so full of desire that Matt's senses swam with lust. Despite the fact that his lips grazed stubble, it wasn't so different from kissing a woman. James didn't kiss hard and insistently like Matt imagined a man might, but softly, submissively, allowing Matt to dominate, only offering his own tongue when Matt started to explore his mouth with his.

He pressed James into the wall, deliberately rubbing his pelvis against his, feeling the unfamiliar sensation of another erection pressing into his. Rather than being unsettled by this, the moan James gave at this contact drove Matt wild.

He let go of James' wrists so he could pull up his T-shirt. James helped him to shed the garment more than willingly. For a moment Matt stood looking down at James'

torso. The man was in fine shape, biceps and pectorals well defined, abdomen flat and muscled, his skin almost 170

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glowing in the dark, moonlit hallway, and a tattoo around one upper arm like a barbed wire bracelet.

Matt placed his hands on James' chest. It was hard with muscle, and James shuddered as Matt's fingers deliberately rubbed at his nipples so they stiffened into tiny peaks. His hands trailed down to his stomach, feeling how the skin started to pucker with goose-bumps over every spot Matt touched. His fingers stopped shyly short of touching the tent in James' boxers.

James tilted his head back with a sigh as Matt leaned down and pressed his

mouth to his neck. His hands encircled James' waist, and he covered every inch of his partner's neck with kisses, moving up to his jaw, nipping at his ear. His lips collided with James' once more as he turned his head back to Matt's with a soft moan.

They shared another long, long kiss, both clinging to the other, James' arms around Matt's neck. After a few minutes, James broke the kiss. "Let's go upstairs," he gasped.

Matt only hesitated a moment, staring into eyes which were pale gems in the dim light before he gripped his partner's hand and virtually dragged him to the stairs.

The climb seemed endless with Matt's limp, the silence between them only broken by heavy, desperate breathing.

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"Here." James indicated a room on the right, and Matt led him in there, barely noticing the king size bed with its black covers, the framed picture above it and the white walls, before he had James back in his arms, kissing him as though he were water in the desert.

When James started to fumble at his belt, Matt tensed, but didn't break the kiss. His mind raced on to where this was leading. He couldn't think about the logistics of it; of what he was going to do to James or vice-versa. He trusted James to lead him there because he had no clue of what to do. He only knew he was harder than he had ever been in his life, and his body screamed and begged for satisfaction.

He trembled, clutching James harder as his button popped and his zipper slid down and finally, the aching pressure on his cock was relieved to some extent. A hand reached hesitantly inside and touched him beneath his boxers. Matt gave a gasp. It had been so long, so fucking long that at that moment, he really didn't care whose hand it was. Warm fingers wrapped around his length. Matt thought at that moment that he might behave like a teenager and lose the plot. His eyes flickered open in surprise and disappointment when James withdrew his hand.



"Can I take this off?" he asked, hands moving to the 172

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hem of Matt's T-shirt.

What a strange question. Didn't James know that he owned him tonight? That Matt was going to let him do exactly what he wanted to him? He lifted his arms wordlessly, gaze fixed on James as he stripped the shirt off and threw it aside.

As James' gaze moved over Matt's bare torso, the body image issues he'd had since his accident flooded back.

Of course he had attempted to build himself up again, but that peak of perfection he had achieved prior to his accident seemed a distant memory. The scars were still visible and they were all he could see.

Then he remembered that James had been his nurse.

He had seen Matt's body countless times and never shown any revulsion, as Matt knew he was trained to do. Good nurses never flinched from unpleasant sights, never made you feel like you were different from other people. He started to relax. This was James and not some woman who he would have to explain his scars to. This was a man who had never once even appeared to notice the scar on Matt's face. The man who had once said Matt was beautiful.

James smiled gently as though he read his thoughts, and slowly his hands moved over Matt's torso, tracing each scar delicately. Matt closed his eyes at the touch, his skin 173

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singing with delight. He moved backwards when James pushed him, and sank down on the edge of the bed, where James then knelt between his knees and lowered his mouth to the splenectomy scar.

Matt stared down at his dark head. He lifted a hand to touch James' hair. He found it soft, freshly-washed, free of the styling products which kept it stubbornly defying gravity. He stroked it as James kissed the scar several times before he moved his mouth down over Matt's stomach, following the line of hair which led to his groin. He pushed the pants down a little off Matt's hips, revealing the scars on his pelvis, and kissing those too.

A lump started to grow in Matt's throat at these ministrations. As much as it turned him on for James to be down near his groin, there was something more to these kisses, something which threatened to undo him. After almost dying, after feeling so alone and desperate and struggling to accept the legacy he had been left with, finally someone was literally kissing his wounds better.

A startling rush of tears burned his eyes, and he fought them back furiously. James lifted his head. He rose up slightly and reached out to touch the scar on Matt's face.

Matt flinched.

"Shh," James said soothingly in a whisper. His 174

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fingers traced the laceration from his ear to the corner of Matt's mouth, and then he leaned close, pressing light kisses all the way down its length. "You are so, so beautiful," he murmured as Matt struggled not to cry in something approaching gratitude.

James' mouth moved to his neck. He planted kisses on it, working his way back down Matt's torso until finally he was between his legs again. He reached inside Matt's boxers, withdrew him and leaned down, enveloping as much of Matt in his hot, wet mouth as he could.

Matt's baser instincts came fully back to the surface, the emotion of a second ago forgotten as he clutched James'

head and groaned with astonishment at how good this felt.

He idly wondered if James had done this before because he seemed more than proficient; sucking Matt down and then letting him slip from his mouth and using his tongue around the head of his cock, lapping and darting and generally teasing in a way which threatened to make him blow his load in record time. He looked down at James, his inner voice yelling at him that he was allowing a *man* to give him a blowjob for Christ's sake, but when James looked up at him through his lashes, that voice fell silent.

He gripped James under the arms and pulled him up into a kiss, touching James between his legs as he did so, 175

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his fingers trembling. After a moment, James stood and pushed his boxers down off his hips. Matt's mouth went dry.

Matt had never looked at another man's body and found it attractive before, but surely James naked would test a saint's chastity. He may not have had muscle on Matt's scale, but he was utterly perfect all over. His cock, thick and circumcised, stood erect, his bush neatly trimmed, his balls hairless.

Matt got to his feet. He kicked off his shoes and peeled off his socks before stripping off his pants and boxers.

James climbed onto the bed and lay down, holding out his hand. Matt took it, moving onto James, sinking between his legs as James opened them. Their mouths joined, and James held him close, pulling him deeper into the kiss so Matt tasted every part of his luscious, delicate lips, and for a moment he imagined their two mouths fusing into one.

Their erections pressed together, and Matt throbbed with need. He pressed harder into James so his own pelvis gave a twinge at the impact. James' hand snaked down between their bodies and started to leisurely jerk him off.

Matt cursed under his breath and buried his face in his 176

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partner's neck, trying to stifle his groans of delight, trying even harder to dampen down a fast-rising orgasm.

"Do you want to...?" He heard a whisper above his own rapid breathing and lifted his head to look at James.

His head spun with the implications of James'

words. He supposed what he meant was have some sort of sex, but what sort? What did he expect of Matt, when Matt didn't even know what he was doing?

"Yes," he replied anxiously, "but I don't..."

James cut him off. "Do you want to stay like this?

With you on top?"

Matt regarded him a moment. If he was staying on top, then he would be the one doing the penetrating. He presumed James meant that, and he nodded because that question didn't even need to be asked.

James leaned over to the bedside drawer and produced two items — a condom, which he carefully laid on the pillow next to Matt's head, and a small tube of something that he pushed into Matt's hand.

Matt opened his hand and looked at it, staring for a long while. He wouldn't ask James why he kept lubricant when he had said he wasn't gay. He didn't want to know how many other men had lain here in the dark with James while he asked them if they wanted to stay on top. Matt 177

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didn't want to think that James had ever done this with anyone else before. He wanted to be the first to do this and the last.

Brushing his thoughts away, angry that they were intruding on his pleasure, he

opened the tube with resolve, sitting back on his heels between James' knees and squeezing some of the liquid out onto his fingers. Matt hesitated, feeling dizzy, as though all the blood had left his brain and concentrated in his cock. He only wanted to have that cock somewhere tight and warm, with friction to milk him deliciously to orgasm. But he was afraid.

James gripped his wrist and moved Matt's hand down between his legs. Matt probed lightly between his partner's buttocks, seeking his entrance, massaging the lube in with the pad of one finger.

James caught his breath as Matt's finger slid inside him slickly, and he slowly fucked James with it, backwards and forwards, gauging his reaction; how he shifted on the bed, one hand gripping Matt's arm, making it clear he found it pleasurable. This encouraged Matt. He pressed another finger inside and used the two together firmly.

James liked this even more. Matt's wet fingers slid in and out, and the thought of it soon being his cock doing this excited him beyond belief.

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*He's done this before.* The idea filled him with a kind of sour disgust, followed by rage. He didn't want a spoiled James, but a virginal one. A part of him wanted to denounce James as the queer pillow-biter he was, to push the man violently away from him, scramble from the bed and retrieve his clothes while spitting abuse at the man who had so effortlessly seduced him.

However, drunk as he was, his libido overcame all the obstacles his mind threw at him. He couldn't stop now.

He needed this more than he had ever needed anything before in his life. And so Matt continued to press his fingers into that slick entrance, and he lowered his lips to James' and swallowed his soft moans, letting that mouth remind him just why he was doing this in the first place.

When he lifted his head and saw the pleasure on James' face, it awed him that he

had caused it. He imagined James coming beneath him, and the thought was almost too delicious to bear.

He withdrew his fingers and reached for the condom, rolling it on with unsteady hands and covering it with lubricant. Even the act of doing this had him trembling with the need to come. Damn it, as soon as he entered James it'd all be over.

Matt looked down at James as he knelt with his 179

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hand around his own cock, seeing how dark with lust his partner's eyes were, how desperate for more he was. He hesitated, wondering which position would provide the best access.

"Turn over."

James did as Matt told him, rolling onto his front, presenting his backside, head dipped low, spine arched.

A shiver of excitement ran through Matt. Certainly this was one of his usual favourite positions, although he felt guilty and disappointed in himself this time that his partner's beautiful face would be hidden from him.

He moved between James' legs, stroking one lean hip with his hand, looking down at his cock again and feeling nervous. He didn't want to hurt James. His hand moved up to the back of James' neck, and his fingers slid under his hair. James murmured in pleasure.

Holding James' hip, Matt guided himself between his buttocks with his right hand.

For a moment he rubbed himself back and forth over James' entrance. Beneath him, James swayed slightly, trembling.

"Please..." he moaned softly.

Matt pushed forward and felt his cock swallowed by velvet. It was all he could do not to gasp in delight at the 180

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sensation. James gave a long, low groan. He pushed himself back, taking every inch greedily, until Matt was sheathed to the hilt.

They stopped a moment, locked together. Matt's hands ran up and down James' back, caressing gently, and he listened to his partner's soft pants of breath. He gripped James' ass in two large hands, withdrew and pushed back in smoothly.

James cursed beneath him. His arched spine undulated gracefully as he moved to the rhythm Matt set, noises of pleasure spilling from his lips.

Matt groaned before he could stifle it. Oh God, James was so beautiful, the body beneath him so sensual, fitting his own so perfectly. He couldn't believe how good this forbidden sex felt.

He reached around and took James' cock in his hand, enjoying the feel of the silky length in his palm, jerking him off slowly in time with his own thrusts. His other arm wrapped around James' chest. He sat back on his heels, pulling James onto his lap. James' back was lightly dewed with sweat. It slid against Matt's torso with delicious friction. James turned his head, and Matt captured his mouth, moaning softly into it. He kept his hand around James' cock as his lover leaned back against one shoulder, 181

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groaning, letting Matt do the work.

Matt increased his thrusts, face buried against James' neck. His orgasm rose swiftly, and he knew it was going to blow his head off. He pushed James back onto all fours, holding him tight with one arm, pressing kisses to his back.

"Matt..." James ground out loudly, " *please...* oh God..."

Matt liked vocal partners. He loved it when the woman below him begged him to fuck her, it turned him on no end, and he liked it just as much now to have a man below him doing something similar.

James gasped and moaned with every thrust, his body trembling beneath Matt. Matt was almost there, but it wasn't an option to come before James. He wanted his partner there if not at the same time, then before him. He was old-fashioned that way. He increased the strokes he gave to James' cock, working it fast and hard.

As his body tightened and he began an explosive rush to orgasm, he pulled James once more back onto his lap, sheathed deeply, holding him tight, savouring his lover's body against his. James cried out, and his muscles clenched in waves around Matt's cock as he spurted into Matt's hand. James' name spilled from Matt's lips as he 182

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came, thrusting up over and over into the tight body until James had milked him of every single drop.

His face dropped against James' shoulder, and he panted for breath, exhausted, holding James tightly around the torso with both hands. His lover moaned softly, his chest heaving, his skin damp with sweat.

Some minutes later James finally lifted himself free.

He slid onto the bed, face down, motionless, and Matt joined him, almost instantly asleep.

A light touch on his shoulder woke him. Turning onto his side, lips met his own and he gathered James immediately close, returning his kiss fervently, his whole body still pulsing with the afterglow of orgasm. They exchanged no words as they kissed until both were falling asleep. Then Matt slid his head into the crook of James'

neck as he drifted rapidly away.



\* \* \* \*

Matt awoke slowly, aware of lying on top of a bed and not in it, his naked skin a little cold. There was warmth beside him, though, and when he turned his head, his nose almost bumped that of his companion. The man beside him lay sleeping, an arm draped over Matt's hip.

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Matt stared at James in confusion before visions assailed him. James face down, Matt gripping his hips and driving into him, James crying out for more. He could not believe these images his memory conjured up. Had this really happened? How drunk had he been? He'd fucked *a man*? He felt his stomach begin to contract in disgust.

Swiftly he disengaged James' arm from around him and sat up. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood, searching the floor for his abandoned clothes.

As he dressed, he glanced over again at his sleeping partner. James looked so peaceful, dark lashes resting against his pale cheeks, black hair flattened with sleep.

Matt felt a little tug deep down inside, but dismissed it quickly.

As he pulled on his shirt he became aware of how he ached in every sinew of his being. Had the sex been so strenuous? It was a kind of delicious, satiated ache though; one which hovered on the verge of becoming arousal again.

For a moment Matt imagined pushing James face down and sliding again into his still wet heat before he even woke up. He didn't want to feel this way. He didn't want his body betraying him again the way it had last night.

He had been confused and emotional. And very drunk.

James had obviously taken advantage of him. His head told 184

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him just how drunk he had been because it pounded mercilessly with every step he took, his throat parched and his eyes stinging.

He took one last look at James as he left the bedroom. As he descended the stairs, he glanced at his watch. Six o'clock, four hours since he had come here.

Outside in the still dawn, he paused at the end of the driveway and looked back at the house.

He had crept out of a few beds in his time, but never had he hated himself quite as much as he did at that moment. He turned away and started to walk down the street, this time not looking back.

# PART TWO

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## Chapter Seventeen

Matt peeled off his clothes and climbed into a red-hot shower. He turned his face up to the spray, sighing as the water hit his aching body. The activity of the previous night had caused it; vigorous sex with a younger woman, three times in all before he'd left her sleeping and crept out at dawn.

He was good at that. In the last month he had crept out of five beds. Each experience had left him feeling emptier than the last. The only one he truly regretted walking away from, though, was the man who had looked inside him, looked past Matt's scars and seen this cold, insular man for what he was — broken and needy.

Time hadn't helped to heal Matt's wounds. He walked with a limp, the scar on his face pronounced.

People stared at him then looked away quickly when he caught them. When he looked at the other side of his face in the mirror, he saw that smooth, attractive profile he had once known so well, and which he had long traded upon.

When he swapped sides, he saw a monster. Perhaps the mirror showed the inner monster, like a variant on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He guessed others saw it too; because those women he had in his bed had never touched or kissed that scar or any of the others on his body. They 187

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kept their eyes tightly shut during sex as though they didn't want to look at who was making love to them. Perhaps James was the only one who hadn't seen a monster, and Matt had thrown him away, even after the words he had said to him, more honest than he had ever been in his life before.

*I can't forget you. I don't want to forget you.*

James had called him a few hours after Matt had left his bed. Matt looked at the name displayed on his screen for a few moments before disconnecting the call.

James tried again later that evening, and Matt did the same thing.

The next day he received a text message. *Call me when you're ready to talk.* Matt didn't call, and after a couple more texts, James gave up.

James had been the only one who understood; Matt knew that. Even three months after having the cast removed from his leg, he still hadn't driven a car. He had the insurance cheque for his wrecked car still sitting at home, and his other car, a BMW, remained in the garage. He was too afraid to take it out. When he thought of getting behind the wheel, he burned hot with fear and anxiety. He remembered being trapped in his car, his pelvis shattered, the bones of his leg sticking through the skin, and his face sliced open. He felt like he wouldn't ever get over his near-death experience, and he knew deep down, although he 188

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would never admit it, that he needed some counselling; something James had offered him and which Matt had refused.

He lifted a hand and traced his fingertips over the scar on his face, and then he looked down at the scar on his leg where the bones had come through the skin and then been pushed back in and pinned together. The woman last night had been a little shocked by all his scars, he could tell, and she had made him feel self-conscious and nervous.

She had made him think of James and the contrast in his attitude, remembering the man who had traced those scars lovingly with his fingers and pressed his mouth reverently to them. Matt did not want to think that this would be the only time his scarred body would ever be accepted by anyone again.

He thought of that dark, moonlit room; James lying on his back with his knees open as Matt pressed fingers into him. He thought of their first kiss, bed-bound and dosed up with morphine, when James had leaned over him and kissed him, and Matt had realised he had never had a kiss like it before in his life. He thought of James against the wall in his hallway as Matt had pushed him there and kissed him with all the passion which had grown uncontrollably for this man. He knew that passion still burned deep, despite how he tried to dismiss James as a 189

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shameful one-night stand.

He put a hand around his erection and stroked, eyes closed. This was the only thing that got him off these days, the aphrodisiac he used in his sexual encounters when he couldn't come or he began to lose his erection. He thought of that night with James. It was more than enough. He spurted over the tiles and slumped against the wall, breathing heavily. This was the last time, he told himself, as he always did.

He got out of the shower when his fingers were wrinkled like prunes. His friends thought he was a dick. He remembered the telephone call with Lewis the day he had crept out of James' bed. Lewis had fished for information, mentioning what a good night it had been, and that they hadn't seen Matt again, and when Matt remained silent for the entire time, *oh hell, did you sleep with James or what?*

He had clutched the receiver hard with eyes closed and told himself to stop lying to Lewis, his best friend. Finally he had replied, "There wasn't much sleeping going on, Lewis."

"That's great, man," Lewis said when he found his voice. "I'm so happy for you."

"Why?"

"Because... you wanted it. Aren't you happy too?"

"Wanted it?" Matt virtually spat. "I wanted to have some guy on his hands and knees while I fucked him in the 190

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ass, did I? No I fucking didn't. I was drunk out of my mind.

I'm not queer Lewis..."

Lewis gave a sigh. "You make it sound sordid and dirty, and I bet it wasn't like that at all."

"It was just sex," Matt responded tightly. "He opened his legs for me. I gave it to him, and then I went home."

"So you did the same that Nick did to me after our first time, when you were so mad at him?" Lewis questioned sarcastically.

"It's not the same."

"Why?"

"Because Nick's in love with you. It wasn't just sex for him."

"And it wasn't just sex for either you or James. Was it?"

"I have to go." Matt hung up. When he'd seen Lewis after that phone conversation he had refused to continue the debate.

\* \* \* \*

It was Sunday, but Matt got dressed and went to the office regardless. Anything to stop him thinking. He had only been there an hour when Lewis called. "Hey," he 191

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answered.

"Hey, man. How's your hangover?"

"Bearable," Matt drawled. "Yours?"

"I had help with it this morning."

Matt didn't reply because he tried to ignore any salacious comments his friend made, still uncomfortable with the burgeoning love affair between him and Matt's office manager.

Lewis coughed. "So, how did you enjoy last night?"

"It was fine."

"She was only *fine*?" Lewis pounced.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were talking about the quality of the night out, rather than the quality of the pussy I picked up." Matt's voice dripped in sarcasm.

"No, I was talking about the latter."

"Well then, she was adequate. Any more details you require Lewis?"

"Yeah. Was James just *adequate*?"

Matt slammed the phone down. This innuendo from all his friends had been going on for a month. He didn't understand why they kept pushing it and why they couldn't get the message. What was difficult to comprehend about a one-night stand? Why did they seem to think it should lead to a grand homosexual love affair? Since when did he tell his friends who *they* should be sleeping with?

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He drummed his fingers on his desk, staring out of the window. He had done the same with Lewis. He had wanted nothing to do with his friend's discovery of the same sex, and it didn't even matter to him that Lewis was deeply in love with Nick. Matt had changed his tune since, of course, because Nick and Lewis came as a package now, and Matt either dealt with that or gave them both up.

In his darkest moments he asked himself why, if Nick and Lewis had done it, he and James couldn't do it, and as always, he gave himself no reply.

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## Chapter Eighteen

Dressed up and doused in cologne, the four of them were out in one of the best bars in the city that Saturday night, Joel cruising with interest, Nick and Lewis firmly fixed on each other, Matt half-heartedly looking around to keep up appearances. Truth be told, he would rather have been at home beneath the covers of his bed jerking off over James.

Lewis noticed first. Matt saw him nudge Nick not so subtly, and then gesture with his head across the room.

Matt immediately followed his line of sight.

James had his back turned, but there was no mistaking the perfectly spiked black hair or the toned body Matt had been so intimate with. His heart lurched and set off at a gallop, leaving him breathless and flooded with panic. He turned his back, emptying his glass.

"We should go," he said unsteadily.

"Oh no," Joel spoke up. "Just because your last fuck is here doesn't mean you get to ruin our night. I like it here.

Everyone has great shoes."

Matt threw him a glare. "Who wants another drink?"

Everyone shook their heads, seeing as they had only just been to the bar. Matt took his leave alone on legs 194

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which felt like jelly.

Queuing at the bar, he fought with himself for several seconds and lost, turning his head to look over at the man who had consumed his thoughts since the

moment he had walked into Matt's bedroom as his nurse all those months ago. James had shifted position, and Matt could see him in profile, the long lashes over the aquamarine eye, the small, freckled nose, the rosebud lips, the white teeth as he smiled at his companion. Matt's pants started to tighten. In horror, he dragged his eyes away, ordered a double Jack Daniel's and concentrated on slowing his breathing.

But he could see James reflected in the mirror behind the bar. The man with him was smaller than James with blond hair and bare, tanned arms, his body lithe and sleek. James rested a hand on one bicep as he said something to his companion, and they both laughed.

A rage of humiliation and shame started to burn in Matt's stomach. He studied the two men's interaction, not liking what he saw. Were they together? They looked way too comfortable, smiling and chatting, attention wholly focused on the other. *If you hadn't have fucked him, maybe you wouldn't be reading this into the situation, he told himself, but now you know James likes to get fucked by men and will probably bend over for this guy later.*

His fist clenched. James was a liar and a fraud. *You* 195

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*had the chance at this. If you hadn't walked out on him, maybe James would be standing here touching your arm now and bestowing that radiant smile on you, and you would be feeling like the luckiest man in the world instead of a bitter and twisted man stewing in a mess of your own making.*

His thoughts turned back to anger and resentment.

Matt had never been one to blame himself for his own actions, not when he could blame someone else. James had seduced him while drunk after lying to him about his sexuality the whole time he had worked for Matt. Now he stood there flaunting that sexuality in front of Matt like the fag he was, with the man who had so easily replaced Matt.

He snapped suddenly. He could no longer stand there watching. Not when he could be over there wreaking havoc and spitting venom at this man who had

brought him out of a darkness of his own making, only to throw him straight back there.

He slammed his glass down on the bar and stalked across the room single-mindedly. James saw him coming out of the corner of his eye and turned to face him, startled, the expression on his face priceless, his mouth open, his eyes wide.

Matt gripped his arm hard with bruising fingers. "I want to speak to you."

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Eyes fixed on Matt's face, James looked too shocked to reply. He didn't even try to pull his arm away.

"Get your hands off him now," rumbled a warning voice from nearby. Matt had forgotten there was anyone else in the bar at all other than this man who made his blood boil with passion. His eyes swivelled in surprise to James' companion.

"I'm sorry? And *you* are?" He used a scathing, condescending tone, making it clear he was here first and this man wasn't any kind of replacement for him.

"It doesn't matter who I am," the man replied, dark eyes flashing. "You take your fucking hands off him right now, or me and you are going to have a problem."

Matt let go of James and turned to face the blond man fully. He towered over him by some inches.

"You need to mind your own fucking business pal,"

he intoned softly. "Before I break your nose in front of all these people."

"Stop." James put a hand on Matt's chest and pushed him back. "If you've got something to say, fucking say it and go."

Matt turned to regard him. Inside he felt a wrench of hurt at the anger in James' eyes. He pushed it down, allowing his own anger to shield him from feeling, as it

usually did. "Outside now," he snapped and stalked off, 197

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throwing a last contemptuous look at James' friend.

He knew this bar, and the fire exit near the bathrooms led into a secluded alleyway. This would be the best place for what he had to say, and he led the way, only looking back once to make sure James was following. His heart beat so hard it hurt his fractured ribs.

The music diminished to a low rumble as he swung open the door to the bathrooms, leaving it for James to catch as he followed him. At the end of the corridor, he pushed open the fire door and stepped out into the blessed relief of cool, end of summer air.

He heard James' footsteps behind him as he retreated up the alleyway into the darkest shadows. Then he turned around to face him and let rip.

"You fucking *lied* to me."

James didn't get chance to reply, staring at him in bewilderment as Matt's tirade began.

"You lied to me time and time again about being gay when you worked for me. You had fucking *lube* at your house and you bent over and let me *fuck* you."

"I'm not gay," James interjected when Matt drew breath, his voice low and calm. "I didn't lie to you. I'm bisexual."

Matt stared a moment before bursting into scornful laughter. "Oh, I see. Haven't made up your mind which 198

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hole you prefer yet?"

"Yeah," James said. "Like you."

Matt saw red. He gripped James by the shirt and slammed him against the wall, yelling into his face. "You goddamn fag; that was the biggest, dirtiest mistake I ever made in my *life*."

"Sure it was. Like you didn't moan for more with every touch and every kiss I gave you. Because I was a fag for letting you *do* it to me, and you *weren't* a fag for fucking me in the ass, right?"

"Shut the hell up. It's a good job I used a condom; God knows what I could have caught from you."

"You fucking bastard. I don't sleep around."

"Like hell you don't, you already moved onto the next poor guy." In the back of Matt's mind, the sly little voice of his conscience protested with every word he uttered. He ignored it, like he always did.

"I don't have to justify myself to you," James cried, hand up against Matt's chest, braced against it as though he would shove him away any moment. "Not since you treated me like a cheap one-night stand."

"Well you got one thing right. That's *just* what you fucking were." Matt made short work of pinning James back to the wall with his wrists above his head as he tried to launch a fist at him. "You need to work at the anger 199

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management," he leered down into his face.

"I *know* how you felt." James struggled furiously.

"You said you couldn't forget me. You wanted that the way I did. It wasn't fucking wrong."

Matt felt like he was coming unravelled. It was as much as he could do to continue the façade. "It was sordid and disgusting. I think you're trying to make

me and you into some grand romance when the fact was, I was drunk off my tits and just looking for the nearest hole to put my dick in. And you *accommodated* me so well."

James' body went completely still against his, sea-green eyes gleaming in the darkness. An ache of regret rose so overpoweringly inside Matt that it threatened to suffocate him. He let go of James' hands abruptly and stepped back.

"I was so wrong about you," James said softly. "I thought..."

"You thought *wrong*." Even as he spoke, Matt remembered James on his knees before him, mouth and hands tracing those scars as though this would be all he would ever need and want.

James remained against the wall, head lowered, face obscured by shadows, teeth biting into his lower lip. Matt took one last parting look at him, drinking him in deep, knowing it would have to last for the rest of his life, before 200

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he strode away, out of the alleyway and back into the bar.

As soon as he hit the air-conditioned, loud inner room, he saw the blond man loitering near the door, glaring, his face belligerent. Matt was suddenly more than in the mood to take him, more than in the mood to take out his anger at James and himself on someone else.

"Don't think I don't know all about you," the blond said between his teeth as Matt drew closer. "You fucking even so much as *breathe* in his direction and you have me to answer to."

Taken aback, Matt wondered just what James had said to this man to inspire such hatred, and he almost admired him at that moment for his loyalty.

"Whatever," he drawled arrogantly in reply, sauntering past the man, already choosing his words deliberately just so he could get into a fight. Just like the bad old days. "I must be a tough act to follow, huh? Once he had *me*, I bet your dick just didn't satisfy him, right?"

James' friend gripped him by the shoulder, and Matt, smiling grimly, whirled around and threw a punch.

The blond man went flying backwards into a table. Glasses smashed and wood splintered as he fell amongst the wreckage.

The red mist fully over Matt, blind to voices shouting his name, he stepped onto the glass and dragged 201

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James' friend to his feet. Even as he pulled him close, he grudgingly admired James' taste in men. Although lean of stature, his adversary was deceptively well-muscled and toned, classically good-looking, and a man most other men wouldn't want to fight.

Which was where Matt differed, because he wasn't scared of any man. Apart from those who had the power to take him emotionally apart bit by bit. Those who had seen him at his lowest ebb and slowly, painstakingly put him back together again, kissed his wounds better and made him whole. And he had responded by treating them like a bit of trash he had picked up on the street.

His thoughts distracted him, and the blond man launched his body weight at him, propelling Matt to the ground. Surprisingly heavy, he struck the first blow, his fist slamming into Matt's jaw, making his vision blur and his eyes water. Gripping the man hard and trying to throw him off, Matt tasted blood in his mouth where his teeth had cut the inside of his cheek. He rolled over violently, pinning his adversary beneath him, and drove his fist into his stomach as the man succeeded in hitting him in the face again.

At that point it was all over as several hands went under his arms, dragging him to his feet and causing him to stagger back as he fought against the combined body weight of his friends.

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James helped Matt's adversary to his feet. James'

friend's face was coldly defiant, his body still coiled with rage, his mouth and nose dripping blood. "You'll keep."

Matt snorted in derision. "You better avoid leaving your house for a while, because next time I see you, I'll fucking kill you."

"Let's go, *now*," Joel snapped abruptly in his ear, dragging him away roughly, other hands on his back pushing him. Matt looked one more time at James and felt endless shame.

He was marched from the bar, Joel at his back and Nick at his side. When he turned back at the door, he saw Lewis had stayed behind, with the enemy.

Outside, Matt's friends got him to sit down on a bench where he put his head in his hands. His jaw throbbed, and he tried to control the urge to run back inside and knock seven more shades of shit out of James' friend.

Joel berated him angrily, telling him in no uncertain terms that he had ruined the night, and they would now probably be on the bar's blacklist, which was a heavy deal in this city.

Ignoring him, Matt addressed Nick. "You know that guy, don't you?"

"Yeah. His name's Michael."

"Is he fucking James?"

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Before Nick could reply, Lewis arrived and cut in.

"Why should you care if he is? What's it to you?"



Matt's eyes narrowed angrily.

"Jealous much?" Lewis suggested.

"Don't," Matt warned him in a deadly voice.

"I thought the days of you brawling in bars were over."

Matt said nothing.

"If you don't want James, why start a fight with the guy he's with?"

Still Matt had no reply to this.

"I can't believe what you said to him, you cruel bastard."

Matt merely glared at him.

Lewis sighed. "Matt, I'm your oldest friend. If you can't admit it to me, who can you tell? James is such a great fucking guy. He knew how to keep you in line when he worked for you, and he was so good for you. He was just what you needed after the accident and I think he's *still* what you need. You've hurt him so badly with the way you've treated him."

Matt held up a hand. "Enough, Dr. Phil."

Nick's lip curled in scorn. "Let's go," he told Lewis.

"The night's over."

Lewis shook his head in disgust at Matt, and the 204

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two walked away, Joel following.

\* \* \* \*

James went straight home, refusing to dissect the evening with Michael, who

spat abuse at him about Matt and told him to get a grip and that the asshole wasn't worth it. James only spared Lewis a few words too before he climbed into a cab. He was angry at Matt; angry that he had spoiled one of the few weekends James managed to get off work, and angrier at himself that he had allowed Matt to do so.

Once there he called David and spilled that night's sorry tale. Both Michael and David knew he was still hung up over Matt a month after the event. David was more sympathetic than Michael. He listened, said the right things and was generally as understanding as he always had been where Matt was concerned, which never failed to surprise James.

Michael didn't know Matt. He only knew what James had told him about his behaviour after their one-night stand, and he knew very little about Matt as James'

patient, because James still considered himself bound by his code of ethics. He had never discussed Matt's injuries and recovery with Michael. He had never discussed Matt's 205

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anger at the world over his accident or his dislike of human touch. He had never discussed Matt jerking off in the bathroom one day while James was outside, and most definitely, he had never discussed giving Matt morphine for his pain and then leaning over him and kissing him. Kissing his patient while employed as his nurse! So Michael wasn't qualified to call Matt an asshole and say he wasn't worthy of James, even if James agreed with him, but he was protective of James and angry that he had been so hurt by this man.

David, on the other hand, knew everything. He had been Matt's nurse after James and there had barely been a day when Matt hadn't been the topic of conversation between them. On that last day James had walked out of Matt's house after working his notice, he had been sure he was going to mourn the loss of Matt for the rest of his life.

The time had passed to two months, during which he had hoped, at the beginning that Matt might make some form of contact and apologise for being

unreasonable and difficult and a nightmare of a patient. But he never had, and James had finally begun to give up hope of seeing Matt again.

After Matt recovered and had no need for a nurse and David left his employ, too, James' regular bulletins on him had dwindled to nothing, and that hope was extinguished.

James had known from what David had told him, 206

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that Matt had been even more miserable and uncommunicative once James had gone, than he had when James had been there. David had surmised that Matt had missed James, and James had allowed himself some pathetic hope for a brief time that Matt felt the pain of loss the way *he* did.

And then Matt had turned up at his house. He had told James he couldn't forget him; that he didn't *want* to forget him. He had made exquisite love to him, only to creep out of his bed at dawn.

James had suffered over this for a month, only to have Matt spit the filthiest poison in his face tonight. How exactly did he come to terms with being told he was the dirtiest mistake Matt had ever made in his life? He didn't know. As much as he tried to tell himself Matt was just afraid and lying to hide this fact, a part of him remained unsure about Matt's feelings for him; even if they had seemed almost blatant at times when James had been nursing him. Instead, he believed every word Matt had spewed. He was a cheap one-night stand, nothing but a hole for Matt to put his dick in.

He lay on his bed, a glass of wine on the bedside table and a book open face down on his chest, while staring at the ceiling, reliving every single thing which had ever passed between him and Matt; every look, every word, and 207

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every touch.

He remembered Matt in his house, staring through the window into his back garden as though mesmerised by his fish pond or his plants. He remembered the taste of beer on Matt's tongue and the way his hands trembled as he touched James. He remembered how his scent had seemed to linger in the house for days, seemed to perfume the bed even when the covers had been changed. He was sure he could still smell him even now. He remembered coming while sitting on Matt's lap, pretty sure he was going to lose consciousness as he shook with rapture.

It had been possibly the most intense session he had ever had in his life; even thinking about it now made his whole body respond involuntarily, so he shivered, moving a hand down to his stiffening groin. He told himself to stop even as his fingers traced the outline of his cock through his pyjama pants. Jerking off over Matt merely buried the man deeper into his psyche, and the way he was going, he would be knocking one out to thoughts of him for the rest of his life.

He lifted his hips, tugged his pants down and wrapped his fingers around himself. Jerking off over Matt was only good for one thing — achieving the fastest orgasm ever. He only had to think about those gleaming, dark green eyes, that satisfied smile on the sensual, 208

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beautiful mouth, and that rather large cock inside him, stretching him painfully.

He only had to think about that superb body against his, the body Matt had issues with the whole time James worked for him, as though its collection of scars made it no longer perfect when these merely made him even more beautiful.

James worked faster to these thoughts, arching his back up off the bed, the way he had when Matt had fingered him so delicately, imagining being on hands and knees, with Matt inside him, his hand around him, sending James to a paradise he had dreamed of since he had met this man.

He came with barely a soft moan, a lot less vocal than he had been with Matt, where he had wanted to shout aloud his praise for his lover, to shout aloud the

feelings which rose to consume him whole at every turn.

He lay quietly on his bed as his breathing returned to normal, and he told himself this was really it. He and Matt were done, and somehow he had to get on with the rest of his life.

\* \* \* \*

Some time later, as Matt lay in bed with the noise of 209

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the bar echoing in his ears and the vision of sea-green eyes in his mind, he was crushed with regret. He told himself he would not feel guilty about a man who had deceived him and seduced him when he was at his most vulnerable, but the words he had spoken to James branded his mind with their cruelty. He had called him a dirty mistake, a cheap one-night stand. Yet the searing memory of *that* night was still enough to make him grow erect at every recollection of it.

He had drunk half a bottle of whiskey before bed to dull the memories but it merely made him remember more.

It made him remember every touch, every kiss, every glide into the depths of James' body.

He shifted his mind firmly to that evening and not a month previously. Michael. Matt would have liked to have killed him, without doubt. He would have liked to do that for the simple reason that Michael was there with James.

He was party to smiles and words and touches from James while Matt languished on the outside, forgotten. This man had replaced Matt effortlessly.

The sharp voice of his conscience cut into his thoughts. You had James that night; you could have had him again. It was *you* who pushed him away. You don't want him, but you don't want anyone else to have him.

You're *jealous*, just like Lewis said you were.

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He couldn't deny the voice any longer. He *was* jealous. He burned with it at the mere thought of the blond-haired man being the one lying between James' legs that night and making him moan for more. His fist clenched and he felt nauseous. He couldn't bear the thought of anyone else having James. It would kill him.

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## Chapter Nineteen

The first thing Matt saw when he woke up in the morning was his own hand on the pillow next to his face, the knuckles split and bruised. He brought them slowly closer to his focusing eyes and looked at the damage. His head throbbed mercilessly. He remembered every punch thrown last night and every look of hurt in James' ocean eyes in startling Technicolor.

He'd dreamed of James pressed against that wall in the alleyway last night. Instead of letting go of James though, as he said, "I was so wrong about you..." Matt had pressed even closer, holding James firmly, kissing that smart, sassy mouth hard. He felt the wet inside of that sweet little mouth as it opened to him and the tongue wrapped around his. He heard the moan in James' throat, and he felt fingers releasing his erection from his pants.

He woke up hard and trembling, his heart pounding.

Matt often walked on the beach on Sundays. If he went early enough, there weren't many people around. That morning he got there around nine, so there were a few people walking dogs and some hardy swimmers dotted in the ocean. Cloudy with a stiff breeze, it wasn't really warm enough to swim. He set off along the long, almost deserted stretch, walking close to the incoming tide on the damp

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sand.

Barely ten minutes into his walk he saw the lone figure in black walking with head down and hands in the pockets of his hoodie from some distance away. Matt would have recognised the shape of the body he was oh so familiar with even if he hadn't seen the spiky hair and the pale face.

His heart lurched painfully, and he cursed low in his throat. His footsteps faltered and slowed, as he debated what to do.

James lifted his head and came to a complete stop.

For a moment the two faced each other over a vast divide.

Then James changed his direction, walking swiftly to his right, towards the looming sand dunes.

Matt watched a moment. Then he started to run; long legs sprinting, gaining on James easily. It was the first time he had run so fast since the shattering of his bones, and the sensation of pain reminded him of his continuing recovery.

James glanced back over his shoulder as he reached the bottom of the sand dunes and looked panicked. He broke into a run; clambering clumsily up the sand, slipping back down a little with every step he took. Matt reached the bottom in another few seconds. He threw himself up the dunes, gripping straggling grass to pull himself up.

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"Don't you fucking run away from me, you pussy,"

he snarled at James, lunging forward and grabbing him by his belt. James twisted and turned in his grip, panting hard for breath, and then lost his footing and slid vertically down the sand dune. The movement of his body caused Matt to slide too. Sand filled his shoes as his feet were submerged, his T-shirt rode up, and sand burned his stomach and trickled down his pants as one hand clutched at nothing, the other hanging onto James' belt for dear life.

A moment later James slid right beneath him, and Matt found his face pressed into the man's back. He gripped James' shoulder hard and dragged himself up his body.

James grunted and grabbed at grass to try to drag himself up again.

Matt responded by using both hands on his shoulders to turn James over onto his back. James struggled against this, still trying to climb back up the dune. Matt



lost his grip and started to slide back to the bottom, clutching James' hips to keep himself in place. He came to a stop with his face pressed into James' stomach. Even as he did, he felt the erection pressing into his neck.

The sudden rush of blood to his own groin horrified him.

"Let me fucking *go*," James cried as Matt clasped his shoulder again and dragged himself up so he was above 214

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him, eye to eye.

As James tried to shove him backwards, Matt seized his wrists and pinned his arms above his head. Slowly, the two slithered down to the very bottom of the dune, still entwined. "Didn't you fucking do enough last night?"

James demanded as he fell limply back in defeat, green-blue eyes spitting venom, pupils huge like an angry cat.

"Why are you running? What are you afraid of?"

James' warmth and his male scent invaded Matt's nostrils.

Their noses almost touched, James' rasping breath playing across Matt's face. His thigh was thrust between James' and a hard-on pressed into his hip while his own pulsed against James' thigh.

"Maybe I'm afraid you're going to put that to good use," James replied smartly, lifting his pelvis fractionally to make his point.

Matt caught his breath and reddened. "I'm surprised you'd be able to take it a second time."

"I think I proved I was more than capable the first time."

Matt stared down at him. He wasn't sure how James had rechanneled his anger into lust, but he had. He swore to himself that he hadn't chased James up the

sand dunes for *this*, but he wasn't sure he believed it. "Are you fucking Michael?" he demanded.

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"That's none of your fucking business."

"It's my business if you were fucking him when you slept with me." Matt squeezed James' wrists hard.

"I wasn't. I already told you, I don't sleep around. I wouldn't have slept with you if..."

"If what?" James' heart hammered against the right side of Matt's chest. It seemed to mirror his own, beat for beat.

James hesitated. "If I hadn't been sure." He turned his head away. "I told you, I was wrong about you."

A giant lump of something approaching regret rose in Matt's throat. He let go of James' right wrist and cupped his face, turning it to his. To his horror, he saw James' eyes were liquid.

He opened his mouth to speak just as James hooked his free arm around his neck and stretched up to him, seeking his mouth with the lips Matt still tasted in his dreams. For a moment he was too shocked to respond to the kiss. Then he tried to pull away, but his effort was feeble, and James came with him, attached like a limpet, mouth glued to his, sending Matt spiralling out of all control.

He moaned as he crushed James down into the sand, opening his mouth to the kiss, their tongues meeting, all reason gone, all thoughts of being on a public beach in daylight gone. He needed this. He needed it like the oxygen 216

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in his lungs. He let go of James' other wrist so James could touch him, and he did. A warm hand slid up his T-shirt, nails digging in, making Matt's spine arch. He kissed James harder, one hand beneath his head, cradling his neck almost tenderly.

The two broke apart for air, panting for breath.

James buried his face in Matt's neck, and held him hard, his words muffled as he spoke. "Fuck, I missed you so much.

You have no idea."

Matt closed his eyes a moment. He let go of James and climbed slowly to his feet. James followed him and the two stood at the bottom of the dune. Matt's lips burned. He trembled all over, his legs barely supporting his weight. His erection throbbed with the need for release. He felt James'

hand on his arm, the flesh scorching his. He shrugged it off roughly and turned his back, setting off back down the beach in the direction he had come from.

He kept his head down, watching his feet, willing them on, willing them not to turn back around involuntarily and sweep this man back into his arms. He couldn't think straight for the lust clouding his mind. And something more than lust. James missed him. He *missed* him.

Matt reached the cliff. Hurriedly he ascended the steps hewn into it which led directly up to the secluded house at the top. He looked back at the beach as he reached 217

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the summit. A dot in the distance, James sat in the sand dune, head against his knees.

Matt sank down on the top step. He had no desire to go inside. He wanted to sit here and wait for James to come to him. James lifted his head from his knees and looked in his direction. Matt saw a flash of silver as he pulled something from his pocket. A moment later, Matt's cell chirruped in his pocket. With a

hammering heart he drew it out and saw the caller ID.

"What?"

"Why are you sitting there watching me?" James'

voice was low and unsteady.

Matt swallowed. "I don't know."

"Jesus, Matt, what just happened..."

"I *know*."

"I want you." In the silence which followed, the line echoed with the sound of the sea, birds crying forlornly over it.

Matt squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed a hand over his face, fighting with himself, knowing resistance was futile. "Come to me," he said in a broken whisper.

The cell disconnected. James got up off the sand.

Matt stood on trembling legs and walked up the path and along the long, tree-lined driveway to his house. He entered by the side door and climbed up the spiral staircase to his 218

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bedroom. There he sat on the edge of his bed with his heart in his mouth and his desire burning him alive.

He needed it. He needed *him*. If he didn't have him, just once more, he'd go out of his mind.

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## Chapter Twenty

After ten long minutes a knock came at the door, and Matt heard Severine's exclamation. "James. What a lovely surprise."

James' answering murmur was muffled. A moment later footsteps sounded on the stairs. Matt tensed, but remained seated until he heard the light tap at the door.

He got up to open it. He hesitated only a second before he gripped James by the front of his hoodie and pulled him inside, into his arms, attaching his mouth to his.

James melted against him as Matt slammed the door behind him, plundering his mouth with his own. James kissed back just as eagerly and wrenched at Matt's shirt.

Matt drew back only enough to discard his shirt before his hands moved under James' clothes, tracing contours of muscle and bone, almost tasting the velvet skin through his fingers. He dragged James' hoodie and shirt off, and James assisted him willingly. Their eyes locked for a brief moment before Matt moved to the bed and kicked his shoes off, sand showering the carpet.

James' gaze flickered to the four-poster with its dark, crimson-black drapes. "This is better than your last bed," he said quietly with a smile.

Unfastening his belt, Matt didn't reply. Exchanging 220

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conversation with James was the furthest thing from his mind. He stripped hurriedly. James' gaze moved blatantly over his body before he climbed into bed behind the curtains and waited for James to follow him.

The curtains parted, and James appeared, naked, his erection swaying as he climbed into the bed. Matt reached eagerly for him, and they fell into each

other's arms, kissing deeply in the semi-dark, intimate enclosure of the bed.

Skin against skin, Matt lay between James' open knees. His mouth moved to James' neck, planting feverish kisses everywhere he could reach, sliding down his torso slowly. James writhed beneath him as Matt sucked each rosy nipple to a stiff peak. He tongued them, leaving them damp and gleaming with saliva.

He carried on down James' hard abdomen, dropping kisses, reaching the neatly trimmed hair, which he nuzzled a moment as he breathed in James' scent. Next to Matt's face, James' cock rested rigidly on his belly.

For a moment, Matt slid James' cock slowly through his hand. Then, very hesitantly, he put his tongue out and licked at the head, savouring the taste. James let out a low groan beneath him. He clutched at the back of Matt's head.

Matt looked up at his lover's face a moment, steeling himself to do something he never thought he would do, then he opened his mouth and sucked James inside.

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If he had thought the sensation would be terrible, he was wrong. James rested hot and heavy in his mouth, and the soft gasps he gave as Matt slid up and down his shaft sent flames of desire straight to Matt's groin.

Oh God, this felt good. James in his mouth turned him on. There was no hope left for him. Matt may as well give himself up to James as his sex slave for the rest of his life. He watched James from under his lashes as he swallowed as much of his cock as he could and weighed his balls lightly in one hand, fingers gentle.

Blatant pleasure etched itself across James' face.

One hand tangled in Matt's hair; the other clutched at his shoulder, his breath coming in pants. James' pleasure was *Matt's* pleasure. He had never before found it so exciting to cause another's pleasure this way. It was intoxicating.

*James was intoxicating.*

Matt moved his lips to mouth his lover's balls, tonguing the soft skin, pressing behind them so James gasped and arched beneath his caress. Breathing hard, Matt slid back up his body to kiss him. When he let his lover up for air, Matt pushed a finger into his mouth, inviting James to suck. Pupils huge, chest heaving, James did so. Matt reached down, searching between James' spread legs, stroking gently until the tiny entrance let him in.

His hand on Matt's cock, stroking steadily, James 222

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shuddered. "Please," he said softly, his other hand on Matt's wrist. "Touch my prostate."

"I don't know where that is," Matt confessed frankly, his voice a whisper in the gloom. " *Show me.*"

James twisted Matt's wrist so his palm faced up.

"Bend your finger forward. Stroke as though you're beckoning to me."

Matt followed his instructions. James jerked on the bed, eyes closed, hissing through his teeth. Matt watched, fascinated, thinking about the condoms in the bedside drawer longingly. Then he realised there was something missing; a vital component for this kind of sex that had been present first time. *Lube.*

His excitement deflated slightly, but there were plenty of other things to do without penetration. He kept his finger tapping on that spot, sending shock after shockwave through James' trembling body. He may as well get James off this way, because there wasn't going to be any sex.

But he wanted selfishly to come with James. He took his hand away. James opened his eyes, blinking as though coming up from under water. "Please," he moaned, taking Matt by the cock and pulling him forward. "Make love to me."

"I can't," Matt said softly, "we haven't got any lube."



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James shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

"It *matters*. I'll hurt you." Matt wasn't so far gone that he wanted to subject James to the kind of pain a dry fuck might cause. He still had some morals left.

"Have you still got the boxes of medical equipment from when I nursed you?" James asked abruptly.

"Yeah, they're in one of the spare rooms. Why?"

"There's KY jelly in one of them."

A slow smile spread across Matt's face. He scrambled between the curtains and pulled a robe on. He glanced furtively down the landing and stairs as he made his way to the junk room at the end, a place where he stored all sorts of stuff which should probably be thrown away. In the two large plastic boxes were heaps of syringes and needles, bottles of sterile water, cannulas, bags of IV fluids and giving sets and scary plastic tubes that Matt was grateful James had never felt the need to introduce into any of his orifices. A blue and white tube nestled at the bottom.

Matt had never been so happy. He dragged it out and shot back down the landing, into the bedroom.

He dropped the robe on the floor, scrabbled in the bedside drawer for a condom and slid between the curtains.

James had a hand lightly around himself, stroking gently, a slight smile on his face. Matt groaned, pressing his lover to the bed, kissing him hard. Fumbling the tube open as he 224

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did, he squirted a large amount onto his fingers and reached down. He found that spot again and stroked gently before insinuating another finger, using them both, driving James crazy.

James took the condom from him and rolled it down Matt's shaft, fingers clumsy with excitement. He rubbed lube over the latex and jerked Matt off as he did so. He pulled Matt towards him eagerly by the hips. Matt knelt forward. He pushed James' knees further apart, took hold of himself and buried himself in one slick slide.

James cried out. He lifted his legs around Matt and gripped his back with bruising strength. Matt leaned forward over his partner and started to thrust slowly, gently. He took his time, savouring it, trying not to go too hard or too fast.

There was one advantage to this position this time; he could see his partner's beautiful face. James was no faker. He moaned loudly with each thrust, his face and the top of his chest flushed. He seemed to be having an even better time than the first occasion. Perhaps Matt was a better lover when sober.

James' back arched. He matched Matt's rhythm, his head thrown back, so Matt tasted his throat. He used his teeth a little too hard and knew he left a mark. James' thighs clenched around his hips hard. He tightened around Matt, 225

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his body stiffening.

Matt reached down and took James' cock in his hand, and James got louder, fingers clawing at Matt's back.

He shuddered, cried out again, and his lips collided with Matt's. He gasped into his mouth almost incoherently.

"Please, Matt, please... I missed you, God I missed you..."

Matt smothered the rest. He wasn't sure his poor heart could take any more emotive confessions from James.

He held the kiss as James came, spilling semen over his fingers, tightening around him steadily until Matt fairly exploded into the writhing body below him.

The sex might have been finished, but the kiss continued another five minutes, lazy, languid and full of sleepy passion. Finally Matt moved out of James and reached through the curtain to put his condom on the bedside table. Then he rested with his face pressed against James' chest, hands encircling his waist possessively while his heart and breathing slowed to a more normal rate. He wanted to stay like this awhile until the sullenly muttering voices in his head became a scream, until they started to ask him what he thought he was doing, *again*. With a *man*.

James threaded a hand through Matt's hair, his other hand on his back, stroking softly. Neither spoke for the longest time.

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A coldness started to wash over Matt soon enough, once the afterglow of orgasm had gone. Jesus, what had he done? He couldn't go on this way. James was going to consume him whole if he let him.

He lifted his head to see James looking down at him, eyes virtually black in the dim light. "Listen..."

James shook his head. "You don't need to say it. I'm going."

Matt moved aside as James shifted below him, sliding between the curtains. Peering through the gap, Matt saw him naked in broad daylight for the first time as he dressed. He was pale, each limb perfectly toned and beautiful, each contour of his body graceful and elegant.

Matt's gaze was riveted to him.

When James turned to look at him questioningly as he buttoned his pants, Matt felt guilty, like a peeping tom.

He threw the man out, but stared at him longingly while he did so. What was the matter with him? He slid his legs to the floor, found his boxers and pulled them on, then remained seated on the edge of the bed as James put his T-shirt and hoodie back on. The two faced each other down in silence.

James moved first, coming to stand between Matt's knees, a hand encircling his neck lightly, bending his head to his.

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Matt's eyes fluttered closed as he received the kiss, soft and gentle, like a butterfly's wings against his still-burning mouth. He reached blindly to James' hips and drew him closer. He didn't want him to go. He wanted him back in his bed, beneath him, moaning for more. He was sure he was going to lose his mind.

James broke the kiss first. "Goodbye, Matt."

That omnipresent lump blocked Matt's throat again.

This was worse than if he had thrown James kicking and screaming from his bed. This voluntary leaving, this kiss goodbye. Like they were civilised men. Like they were saying goodbye forever. His chest ached, and it hurt to breathe. This couldn't be all he would ever have. He reached out and encircled James' wrist with his hand.

James pulled it away firmly. His eyes were liquid.

He moved swiftly to the door, fumbled a moment at the handle and then disappeared.

Downstairs, Matt heard Severine speak. "James, what's wrong? Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine. It was lovely to see you again, Severine," came the too-cool reply before the door closed.

Matt fell back onto the bed, seeking the portion of pillow where James' head had been and breathed deeply of the scent still lingering there.

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# Chapter Twenty-One

At home, James got into a red hot shower and scrubbed hard with a scratchy net ball, anxious to be free of the scent which lingered on him. Matt had a certain smell about him which was as familiar to James now as it had been a month ago. A combined smell of soap, of hair styling products, aftershave and something else...

something which James could not define, but which drove him wild; and probably had from that very first moment he had bent over Matt in bed to adjust his pillows.

Even as clouds of steam rose and bubbles of shower gel flooded down the drain, he could still smell Matt. He ached all over, his shoulders bruised from where Matt had grabbed at them in the sand dunes, his wrists sore from where Matt had held him down.

Never again, he told himself. Of course, he'd told himself this after the first time too. This time he had to be determined not to be Matt's toy. Never again.

\* \* \* \*

Matt lay sore and stiff, his body protesting against the activity he had put it through that morning. He finally climbed out of his bed and stripped the sheets from it. He 229

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paid Severine to do such things, but he could hardly ask her to change his bed merely a day after she had just done it.

She would wonder why. He couldn't tell her it was stained with his illicit lover's semen and KY jelly.

He went out to the bedding cupboard on the landing, found some new covers and set about making the bed. However, despite the fact that the pillowcases no

longer matched, he didn't change them. He couldn't bear to wash away the scent of James' hair on his pillow.

Lewis called an hour later. "Hey. How's your Sunday morning going?"

Matt took a moment to reply. "The usual."

"You still in bed?"

"Yeah."

"Had any company?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"No, Lewis."

"Are you sure about that?"

"You're starting to piss me off," Matt growled.

"Have you got something to say?"

"Yeah," Lewis said. "You were seen this morning on the beach."

Silence reigned supreme on the line. "By you?"

Matt asked finally.

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"No. Joel. He saw you tangling with James in the sand dunes. He saw him follow you to your house. Still want to tell me you haven't had company this morning?"

Matt sighed. "He was here. He's gone now."

"Yeah. I know that. I called him, and you know what? He *lied* to me about seeing you. Why would he do that?"

Again, deafening silence. James obviously thought Matt was a dirty little secret too.

"Is it because it went badly this morning?"

"You know, I really don't think I can talk about this, or that I want to, particularly."

"So you slept with him?"

"What did I just say, Lewis?" Matt demanded angrily.

"You slept with him and what? Threw him out after?"

Matt heaved a furious sigh. "I didn't make him leave, he left of his own accord, okay? We both wanted it that way."

"Really?"

"I don't care if you don't believe me."

"So... what?" Lewis asked. "You kissed him tenderly goodbye and said 'I'll call you, babe'?"

"Fuck off."

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"What then?"

"I'm this close to hanging up, man, I mean it."



Please, Lewis. No more. I'm tired."

"Fuck, Matt, you don't have to make this so hard on yourself. You don't have to do this to yourself."

Matt didn't reply.

"Okay, listen. Dinner at mine, seven-thirty on Friday."

"Sure, but listen, don't give me the third degree again, please. Just... leave me alone."

"Sorry," Lewis said quietly. "I only want you to be happy, and I know you're not."

"See you on Friday." Matt hung up.

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## Chapter Twenty-Two

Never the best time keeper, Matt arrived at eight.

He had made an effort; wearing a new shirt and pants, both black, his hair neatly gelled back. He had been pleased with his appearance in the mirror until he looked too closely and saw his eyes were haunted and empty.

Shrieks of laughter emanated from the living room as Lewis let him in, and he was suddenly glad for the invite, and that his friends still wanted him around after all the water under the bridge, miserable demanding bastard that he was.

He pushed the door open, Lewis behind him, and immediately saw James sitting silently in the corner, opposite Joel. James looked more anguished than shocked; as though he had expected Matt, but Matt had never expected Lewis to do anything so daring, so fucking wrong.

Their eyes met for an intense second before Matt turned around and shoved Lewis back into the hall, pulling the door closed behind him.

"What the hell are you playing at?"

Lewis shrugged innocently. "I didn't think you'd both come. Maybe you can be civil and not put his head in the dessert."

"*Fucker.*"

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Lewis calmly squeezed past him and led the way back into the living room, smiling brightly at James, who immediately focused his eyes onto his beer bottle instead of on Matt.

Matt went straight into the kitchen and into Lewis' fridge, where he wrenched

the top off a beer and drank it down as fast as he could. This, as far as he could see, was the only way to get through tonight.

Nick sat at the island in the kitchen, looking rather domesticated as he whipped cream in a bowl. Out of nowhere Matt's mind filled with such lascivious thoughts that he started to stiffen. Horrified at himself, he moved to the window and stared out blindly into Lewis' lovingly kept garden, even though he could barely see anything in the darkness beyond the reflection of the kitchen lights.

"Don't be too pissed off, man," Nick said quietly behind him. "He only has your best interests at heart."

Matt didn't reply.

\* \* \* \*

James wasn't stupid. When he saw Joel there too, after Lewis had said it would only be Nick when he invited him, he'd smelled a rat. There was no way this dinner would happen without Matt. And so, sitting in the corner and gathering Dutch courage, he prepared himself mentally to deal with the man who had used him and thrown him 234

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away twice. He saw defensiveness and coldness as his only weapons. Matt didn't need to know he had hurt James once again; he probably got off on that fact. When Matt came into the room, though, looking so well-groomed, so goddamn hot, James' resolve nearly faltered. He wanted only one thing. To be lying within the enclosed curtains of that four-poster bed while Matt showed him the time of his life. *Again.*

\* \* \* \*

Lewis called everyone to the table and served the first course. His friends expected to get good food when they came to his house, and he didn't disappoint, starting off with smoked salmon and avocado.

Matt barely tasted its delights. His gaze constantly strayed to James opposite

him. He watched how his fork disappeared into that sensual mouth and thought of how it felt around his cock that first time. His mind drifted to the previous Sunday, and lingered far too long on what James had felt like in his mouth. This memory aroused him, and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat and averted his gaze as every touch and every kiss came back to him.

*How long can I go on fighting it?* he asked himself in a moment of blinding clarity. How long could he go on fighting the need for the most amazing sex he'd ever had in his life?

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He and James didn't speak to each other until Nick rose to help Lewis clear the plates. Then James suddenly addressed Matt over the table.

"How's the physical therapy going? You're still having it, right?"

Taken aback, Matt mumbled an assent and gulped some wine down to hide his flushing face. James' beautiful gaze rested unflinchingly on his, and Matt became convinced that he could read every not-so-pure thought in his head.

"Getting much exercise?" James asked.

Matt's eyes narrowed, and he glared.

James blushed abruptly. "I didn't..."

A sudden snort came from the end of the table. Joel jammed his serviette over his mouth and turned his outburst into a cough.

"Got something to say?" Matt demanded, gaze swivelling to him.

Joel shook his head, quivering with laughter.

Matt glanced back at James. He felt oddly sorry for his embarrassment now, realising James' question had been innocent.

James looked at Joel. "What?"

Matt sighed. "He spied on us. On Sunday. On the beach."

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James looked mortified. He stood abruptly. "Excuse me." He went hurriedly out into the hall and disappeared up the stairs.

"Oops." Joel smirked.

"Asshole," Matt growled.

"Now don't get all defensive because I upset your boyfriend," Joel drawled.

"Shut the fuck up, dickwad."

Joel cackled and stood up. He retreated to the kitchen, where he told his hosts loudly to stop fondling each other over the main course and give him more wine.

\* \* \* \*

Upstairs in the bathroom, James stood with his head against the mirror and his eyes closed. He couldn't make it through the rest of this dinner. He would have to tell Lewis he had been taken suddenly ill and needed to go home.

Which would make him a pussy, just like Matt had called him when he had tried to flee over the sand dunes.

He straightened up. He had faced bigger obstacles than Matt-fucking-Harmon in his life. He didn't understand why he couldn't take the sex they'd had for the casual fucking it obviously was. Maybe if he did, Matt would be inclined to want to repeat it. No wonder James scared him off, with the hurt eyes and the seriousness. Maybe if he joked and teased and asked Matt when he could get his

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cock again, he might be more receptive. Maybe if he actually appealed to Matt's dick and not his heart, he would get somewhere.

Sadly, to behave like a whore wasn't in James'

nature and never would be. He never slept with anyone lightly. Perhaps that was his trouble.

\* \* \* \*

Lewis and Nick served the main course, enquiring after James. Joel said something which Matt didn't even hear, so preoccupied was he with his mounting anger. He was angry at everyone. Angry at Lewis for setting him up, angry with Joel for making everything so much harder, angry with James for being there and for the effect he had on him, and most of all, angry with himself for being obsessed.

James slid into his seat and mumbled thanks to Lewis as he set his plate before him. Matt didn't look at him. He ate in silence, his anger merely growing rather than diminishing until it seemed to consume him whole and throbbed in his ears and his temples. He wanted to punch someone, which had always been his natural response.

What a shame James' faggot boyfriend wasn't here; he would be a more than agreeable target.

His thoughts turned even darker when he thought of Michael; of the way he and James had been talking in the 238

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bar, James' hand on his arm. For a moment he imagined James under Michael the way he had been under Matt twice, and he felt such violent, murderous jealousy that it was all he could do not to scream with it. Oh God, just the idea of James with anybody else, much less another man, made him sick to his stomach. He thought of the women and men who must have had James on their arms,

showing him off in public. He could bet everyone's head turned when James walked into a room. What a thrill it would be to know this man was yours; that he was coming home with you at the end of the night. His thoughts appalled him.

He somehow lasted through dessert, a chocolate concoction made with the cream he had seen Nick whipping. He consumed more and more wine until his head swam and the chocolate and cream on his tongue aroused him into a frenzy. He stared at James, blind with lust, not sure if he wanted to fuck or beat the man to death, afraid he wouldn't be able to control himself if he got his hands on him.

James started to look a little anxious, as well he might. As soon as Lewis got up to clear the dishes, James got up with him, insisting on helping. Nick, who had been about to help, sank down in satisfaction and poured himself some more wine. Matt watched Lewis and James go down the hall to the kitchen before he stood up. He swayed in 239

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place, and held onto the table for a moment, trying to weigh his options before he acted, and failing. Only one thought drove him. Ignoring Nick and Joel who looked at him curiously, he headed for the kitchen.

Inside, Lewis and James were talking about him; that much was obvious by their guilty faces and the way they both shut up when he entered the room. His gaze met James' intensely. "Give us a minute, Lewis." Lewis acquiesced quickly, closing the door behind him.

There was a moment of hot, angry silence before Matt grabbed James' shoulders hard, spun him around and used one hand to sweep everything from his path in a shower of crockery and leftover food as he forced him face first over the kitchen table.

James gasped and tried to resist, but Matt merely planted a large hand in the centre of his back and shoved him back down again, while his other went to James' belt, releasing it deftly.

"What are you...?" James protested.

"What the fuck's going on in there?" demanded Lewis from outside.

"Don't you dare to come in here," Matt called venomously in warning, pausing in the act of unfastening James' pants. "Don't you fucking *dare*!"

Silence came from the other side of the door. A 240

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moment later, the soft background music in the dining room was turned up a few notches. Matt smirked viciously to himself. He released James' button and zipper and dragged his pants and boxers down.

"Fucking *stop*," James growled, and Matt had to shove him back down again.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way," he said with grim determination.

"You bastard," James spat, writhing beneath him as Matt drew his own clothes down.

"That's me," he affirmed distractedly as he stared at the pert backside ripe for the taking before him, and remembered he had one vital ingredient missing yet again

— lube. He really should take to carrying it around with him. However, he was far too concerned with satisfying the demon which screamed for release inside him to care too much this time about hurting James.

Nonetheless, he cast about for a brief moment, keeping his hand on James' back as he did, before spotting a familiar bowl on the counter. He reached behind him and grabbed it, setting it down on the table next to James, who craned his head around, looked into the bowl and let out a low groan which almost sent Matt out of his mind with desire.

He plunged a hand into the whipped cream and 241

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brought it to his dick, slicking it up, the coolness making him shudder slightly, his own hand feeling so good on himself that he had to fight to take it away. He pushed one of his creamed fingers into James, feeling him tense and squirm against it. James moaned and shuddered as Matt added a second.

He withdrew them and took hold of his cock, his other hand keeping a firm hold on James' hip, so drunk that he worried he might fall over before getting himself where he wanted to be.

He thrust into James, and his lover gave a stifled cry as Matt buried himself as far as he could go. He paused a moment, groaning with delirious pleasure, lying forward across James' back with one hand feeling beneath him.

James sucked in his breath as Matt's fingers closed around him and roughly started to jerk him off.

He waited until his lover gasped and moaned suitably under his ministrations, then he stood upright again, gripped his hip and did his best to hit that place James had shown him previously. In retrospect, cream wasn't the best of lubricants. It was a dry, tight ride that would end in soreness on both sides, but James almost yelled when Matt finally found the spot.

"Fuck, oh Jesus, Matt, please... *please*..." He pushed himself back against Matt, then forward into his 242

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hand, nails scrabbling at the table while Matt felt possibly the most premature orgasm he had ever had rising and, drunk and selfish, did nothing to fight it back.

He thrust a few more times before he came with a groan. His hand dropped away from James in his ecstasy, and his lover moaned in what sounded like disappointment beneath him. He fell onto James' back, panting hard, arms over James' shoulders, hands gripping to the edge of the table. He lay there virtually insensible for a few moments, his mouth against the back of James' neck, lips kissing the damp hair, before he became aware of James still moving back against his softening dick.

Matt put a hand down and found James jerking off.

Firmly he took his lover's hand away and replaced it with his own, then pushed himself into that spot again with the last remains of his erection as he brought James off. James let out a few breathy moans as he spurted over his hand and collapsed motionless beneath him.

Satisfied, Matt drew out of him. He reached for some paper towel from the counter behind him and wiped off his sticky hand, cleaned the cream off himself and tucked himself away. He glanced back at James, who had started to move on the table. Amongst the cream smeared around his backside, Matt saw a dribble of his own semen running from between James' buttocks. He stared. He had 243

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the sudden urge to drop to his knees and taste himself on James. He controlled this disgusting thought with an effort and pushed some paper towel into James' hand.

Matt tried not to look as James cleaned himself up as best he could. His cock was still half hard, and he knew without doubt he would be able to go again quite easily. He moved to the sink to wash his hands while James dressed.

When he turned around, drying his hands, James was pale and angry. "Why didn't you use a condom?"

Matt came back down to earth with a bump. This had been the furthest thing from his mind. "I didn't have one."

James glared at him. "Are you clean?"

"What? Are you fucking serious? Are *you* fucking clean?"

"I already told you, I don't sleep around. And frankly, I bet *you* do."

Matt boiled with anger. Nothing like the truth to touch a raw nerve. "Hey, I sleep with chicks. I don't have a dick up my ass on a regular basis."

James reddened. "Neither do I. The only dick I've been having has been yours, Matt."

Matt said nothing. He felt a perverse feeling of pleasure to have this confirmed.

"I don't give a shit if it's chicks or dudes," James 244

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went on. "Are you always so fucking careless?"

"Like you tried to stop me," Matt snorted in derision. "You didn't complain while you were being fucked six ways to Sunday." Even as he spoke these words, Matt was disgusted with himself. The session had started out as rape; he knew that, even if it had rapidly morphed into consensual.

"Well, I'm complaining now. Answer the fucking question." James looked ready to punch Matt.

Matt stalked across the kitchen to him until they were standing way too close and he looked down into those sea-water eyes. "I never did it without a condom in my *life* before, okay?" He turned around, threw the kitchen door open and stormed down the hall.

"Matt." Lewis' voice stopped him at the front door.

Matt, with hand on the handle, didn't turn around. "I have to go, Lewis. I'm sorry. Send me the bill for your dinner set, okay?" He wrenched open the door and stepped into the night.

\* \* \* \*

At home, Matt climbed straight into the shower.

The water, as hot as he could stand it, made him feel a lot more sober than he had when he had fucked James over 245

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Lewis' table. He could not actually believe his own actions.

Three times he had done it now. *Three times!* And this time not even in a private place, but over his best friend's table!

He wasn't gay; he couldn't be. After all, he didn't like any other men; he just had this terrible, obsessive compulsion for James, and James alone.

*Would it be so bad*, a seditious voice whispered inside, *to just have James and no one else?* No one had to know. He didn't have to have a *relationship* with him, just go around to his house and fuck him a couple of times a week, just enough to keep this obsession damped down. He didn't have to take him out or treat him like a woman. He could just keep him secret, couldn't he?

He sighed, continuing to scrub at his reddening skin. That would be all he could offer James. A couple of cheap fucks a week. He wouldn't even know where to begin maintaining a relationship. Somehow, he doubted James would go for that. He already knew without doubt the man was anything but cheap. He certainly deserved better than Matt.

\* \* \* \*

James had finished in the shower and now lay beneath his covers with the light still on, staring at the 246

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ceiling. He had been sweeping up the broken dishes with a dustpan and brush when Lewis and Nick appeared in the doorway. Mortified beyond belief, he had apologised and said he'd pay for the damage. That spineless bastard, doing that and leaving him to face the music alone. And without a condom too, the worst thing of all. And James let him do it.

He actually didn't care; he had wanted it so bad.

Even now his body burned all over as though Matt's skin still pressed against it.

He couldn't even pretend to himself that he hadn't wanted it because it was possibly the most exciting thing which had ever happened to him, despite the fact that Matt had been so drunk that he had grown selfish with it, not caring to get James off before him like in previous times. One thing about that sex had hurt and disappointed James most of all. Matt had not once kissed him. That stung badly. That made James feel like the cheap screw he knew he was, when the previous two times he could at least pretend he meant something to Matt when his lover kissed him tenderly. This time hadn't even had that saving grace.

Because of this, maybe he could finally be strong now. Maybe he could stop allowing Matt to possess him utterly at every opportunity. But he didn't know how, because Matt obsessed him. There was not one single minute of the night or day that he didn't crave Matt; 247

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physically, mentally, right down to his goddamn soul. Matt obviously had some sort of physical obsession with James, making him want to fuck his brains out every time he saw him, but that was it, as far as James could see. While for James, it was so much more than sex and always had been.

He wished Matt could see himself through his eyes, because James knew Matt thought he wasn't worthy to have someone care about him; that his body was damaged and ugly and no one would ever want him again. But James had seen a different side to him, albeit infrequently, and he knew Matt had the capacity to be kind, funny and sensitive, if only he would show it. If only he would let James in.

If he let him do it to him again, James would end up saying something he shouldn't. These words, which weighed him down like a millstone around his neck, begged to be heard. That would be the way surely, it occurred to him, to make sure Matt never bothered him again. Say those words in the heat of the moment and watch him run for the hills.

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## Chapter Twenty-Three

"Matthew?"

Coming up from the sleep of the dead, Matt heard himself mumble, "James?"

"No," the voice said, definitely female.

Matt cracked one eye open. Sprawled across his bed, he found himself fully dressed, his face mashed into the pillow, cheek stuck wetly to it with drool. He groaned as a heavy metal band made its presence felt inside his skull. Then he groaned inwardly as he remembered the drinking and the activity which had led to him passing out in this state over his bed.

He tried to lift his head. Severine stood over him.

Way to give away everything, calling your housekeeper by your sometime fuck's name. "What are you doing, Matthew?" she asked gently, with a mother's concern.

"Why aren't you undressed?"

Matt tried to form his mouth into words and failed.

He groaned again.

"Lewis is here to see you."

Matt squeezed his eyes shut as he remembered expensive plates smashing on the floor, whipped cream and all his dreams coming true once again.

"Shall I send him up?"

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Reluctantly, Matt grunted an affirmative.

"And breakfast for you both?"

Matt nodded, which led to an immediate increase in pain. His eyes closed as Severine left, only to open a few seconds later with a loud voice. "Look what the fucking cat dragged in."

"Don't, Lewis," Matt managed to croak.

"Get up."

Matt pried his cheek from the wet pillow and slowly sat up, wiping the back of his hand over his mouth.

Lewis stood at the side of the four-poster, arms folded across his chest.

"Look, man," Matt began, "just let me have some coffee, and then we'll go to the best store in town and I'll buy you the most expensive dinner set you ever had in your life."

Lewis shook his head, glowering. "This isn't about my dinner set, goddamn it."

"Isn't it?" Matt asked wearily.

"No. You fucking know what it's about. Your inability to control yourself where James is concerned."

Matt sighed. "Got to piss, Lewis, excuse me." He planted his feet gingerly on the floor and set off to the bathroom.

While he peed, Lewis stood on the other side of the 250

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door, ranting over what a bastard he was to fuck James in public like that and then walk out. Matt flushed the toilet, washed his hands and walked back out.

"It was hardly in public." He pulled some fresh clothes from his closet.



"It was over my kitchen table. How would you like it if I came to your house for dinner, swept all Severine's food off the table and fucked Nick over it?"

Matt's face burned. A knock at the door startled him. He called to Severine to come in.

Severine smiled at them both as she brought in a tray laden with food. Matt was convinced Severine had heard everything. She had probably heard the noisy sex in this very room last Sunday, too. She was probably going to give her notice because she didn't want to work for a fag.

He murmured his thanks and waited for her to leave. Lewis sat down on the bed next to the tray and started to pour the coffee. "Answer my question," he demanded.

"I wouldn't like it at all, Lewis," Matt said softly, chastened. "I was drunk. I had no self-control. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"You're damn right it won't. My table is fucking *buckled* dude, with the weight of you two rhinoceroses on top of it."

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Matt reddened still further. "I mean, James and I won't happen again," he muttered. "If you would just stop setting me up."

"I'm not here to say it shouldn't happen again,"

Lewis said in exasperation. "I'm here to say it should, but that you should treat him with more respect and fuck him in this nice bed and not over my goddamn table."

Matt took the proffered cup of coffee and sipped it.

He shook his head. "It was a mistake, I already told you this a million times."

"And you fucked him *three* times, at least that I know about. It's a mistake to fuck someone *once*, man, what's three times? Did you trip and land in his ass?"

Matt couldn't get any redder. He wanted to climb into bed and pull the covers up, then wake up and discover James was only a dream. Then he imagined never seeing James again, and it hurt deep down. Right down to his very soul.

"I need to shower," he mumbled. "Eat your breakfast." He took his clean clothes and his coffee and virtually fled into the bathroom.

Under the hot spray, he leaned against the wall and relived every single second of last night. And as he did, he realised he hadn't kissed James once. He hadn't kissed him since last Sunday. A full six days.

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Outside, Lewis reclined on his bed, half the food eaten, Matt's TV blaring *Fuse*. Matt went to the tray and grabbed a piece of cold toast. He noticed an aspirin on the side of one of the plates and smiled at Severine's thoughtfulness. He washed them down with some orange juice.

"Okay Lewis, let's go get your dinner set."

Matt's damp hair felt comfortingly cool against his aching head as they stepped out into a hot September afternoon and got in Lewis' car. Lewis tried to protest that he didn't care about a new dinner set, but Matt ignored him and told him to drive. The pain still bulldozed his skull. He thought of how many Saturday shoppers would be out and already felt the urge to kill.

"Where's Nick?" he asked conversationally.

"Still in bed." Lewis snorted. "He was nearly as drunk as you last night."

Matt said nothing. He thought of Lewis and Nick curling up together once he had gone home alone to his miserable house and felt a sharp pang of jealousy. He thought of how Lewis had probably awakened in Nick's arms this morning,

and he wondered what that would be like.

"You and him, are you okay?"

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"Yeah." Lewis cast a look of surprise at him.

"I just don't want... you know... for either of you guys to be unhappy. I know I was an asshole when..." He trailed off.

"I don't want you to be unhappy either Matt, and at the moment, you're fucking miserable."

Matt shook his head.

"Yes, you are. You're still not over your accident.

You've got a BMW sitting untouched in your garage and a cheque from the insurance company for your Gallardo lying in the fucking bank, and instead you take taxis to work. James was the only good thing that came out of you nearly dying, and instead of letting him help you, you threw him away. And now you treat him like some cheap fuck to be picked up whenever you need to get off."

"Don't, Lewis," Matt warned him. "Not again."

"I can't keep quiet. If you would only talk to him and put your feelings for him on the table..."

"Shut the fuck up, Lewis, or you can let me out right here."

Lewis fell silent until they reached their destination.

He shut off the engine and turned to look at Matt. "Is it too expensive?" He gestured to the store.

"No. I told you, whatever you want."

"You didn't smash the whole set, you only need to 254

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buy me some plates and..."

"A full set," Matt interrupted, releasing his seatbelt.

"Let's go."

Lewis put a hand on his forearm suddenly, stilling him. "Listen. Last night, you didn't..." he hesitated, " *hurt* him did you?"

Matt raised one eyebrow, glowering. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. I heard him shout out, and instead of coming to help him, I left him at your mercy. I feel bad about that now."

Matt glared at the insinuation. "Are you calling me a rapist, Lewis? Is that what you think?"

"No, I just..."

Matt shook his head dismissively. "I assure you, you can't rape the willing."

As soon as Matt entered the store, he lost Lewis, which was fine by him. Aimlessly wandering, tuned out to his surroundings, his mind moved relentlessly over every dreadful moment of the night before.

Jesus, whipped cream, no condom, Lewis' fucking *table*. He didn't know which was worse. He finally settled on the no condom fiasco, being a man of practicalities. This appalling slip of the dick guaranteed one thing, that he couldn't avoid James for the rest of his life. That he had to 255

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search the man out to quiz him on his sexual history before he decided to get

tested for all manner of diseases. Never mind what James had told him about not sleeping around.

He fucked men. Matt couldn't get any more high risk. He may as well have shot up heroin with a dirty needle.

He couldn't think of anything he'd rather do less.

With his track record of lack of control over the past week since James had invaded his life once more, going around to his house would merely result in one thing — Matt taking James on any convenient surface the moment he walked in the door, condom be damned. *Damn him and what he's doing to me.* He didn't spare a thought about what he might be doing to James. His own mental anguish completely consumed him. That and the fact that his head felt like it was going to explode, and his mouth tasted like something had died in it, despite copious amounts of mouthwash.

He would go right from here. As soon as Lewis picked his goddamn plates, he could get dropped off at home, get a cab to James' and ask the fucker how many cocks he'd had in his ass and whether he rode bareback or not, before he told him he never wanted to see him again and got the hell out of there as quickly as he could.

For a moment he put a hand out to steady himself against a shelf, feeling nauseous, eyes closed. When he 256

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opened them again, James stood frozen at the end of the aisle a few feet away with a dinner plate in his hand, like a rabbit caught in headlights. Matt stared, a vast wave of emotion consuming him so his legs began to tremble and his heart beat so hard it hurt.

"Are you stalking me?" Were the only words he could find.

A frown crossed James' face. "I'm buying Lewis a dinner set," he said, as though Matt was stupid.

"You don't have to do that," Matt snapped. "I broke it, I'm buying it."

James wedged the plate under his arm and reached into his back pocket. "I'll give you half then." He opened a black leather wallet.

"I don't want your money," Matt said contemptuously. "On your wages I doubt you can afford to shop here anyway."

For a moment James looked at him with a hurt expression on his face that rapidly turned to anger. Before Matt could even react, his part-time lover hurled the dinner plate at him. "Fuck you!"

The plate shattered against the arm Matt hastily threw up to defend himself, a piece of china striking him on the cheek.

Matt stalked forward, seeing red, his cheek stinging 257

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and wet and tried to grip James by the throat. James dodged back and Matt grabbed him by the shirt and threw him against the shelf. The shattering of china was a loud, deeply unmusical crescendo as the two found themselves ankle-deep in it.

James' fist came out of nowhere. It hit Matt on the jaw on the same side as the shard of china, snapping his head back. Matt stumbled backwards, releasing his hold on James, so James followed this up by shoving him across the aisle into the opposite shelf. More china fell, some from the top, cracking Matt across the back of the skull. James pinned him there, fists balled in his shirt tightly, his face close to Matt's, flushed with rage, eyes glittering.

"You need to stop right now before I call the cops,"

screached a frightened female voice from the end of the aisle.

Matt and James turned their heads to see a young, wide-eyed shop assistant. Behind her stood Lewis, eyeing them both in disgust. He started forward quickly. "Break it up, you fucking dicks." He grabbed James' shoulder and

wrenched him back.

James made no protest; he just looked at Matt with eyes which were suddenly coldly calm. As Matt remained against the shelf watching him, James spoke. "I never want to see you again as long as I live."

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He turned away, saying to the shop assistant as he passed, "He's paying for the damage. He earns more than me." He stalked out of the shop, not looking back.

"You're bleeding. Here." Lewis shoved a wad of tissues at Matt as they got into his car. Matt pressed them to his cheek and pulled down the sun visor. The mirror showed him a cut along his cheekbone, on the opposite side to his scar, and a swelling to his jaw and bottom lip. The back of his neck and his shirt felt wet. He put a hand to the sore part at the top of his head and it came back crimson.

"Turn round." Matt did so. Rough fingers parted his hair, making Matt wince. "Your head's gashed open. I need to take you to the ER."

\* \* \* \*

After five staples in Matt's head and some glue and butterfly stitches to his cheek, Lewis dropped Matt at home. They hadn't spoken a word on the drive back, and very little while they had sat in the waiting room for an hour. Matt felt the weight of Lewis' disappointment in the silence between them, but no one could be more disappointed in him than himself. Disappointed that he had behaved that way in public, in front of Lewis, but also humbled by the beating he had taken at James' hands, he 259

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who usually threw the first and the last punch, who usually sent his opponent to

the ER. He didn't feel all that *angry* at James for some reason, despite his aching head and throbbing jaw. He opened the door. "Thanks, Lewis," he said quietly as he got out. Lewis didn't reply, only gunned his car out of the drive.

\* \* \* \*

At home, James had washed his bruised, bloodied knuckles and applied a little ice to them to minimise the swelling. Now he sat on his patio in the late afternoon sun, staring across at the pond, watching the shadows his fish cast in the water. He wasn't proud of himself. In fact, it caused him distress to know that he had spilled Matt's blood. It was on the front of his own shirt, and he looked at it with regret. He didn't want to hurt the man who held his heart in the palm of his hand, but that man slowly squeezed it tighter and tighter every day until he suffocated the life slowly from him. James had no choice but to lash out in anger at his tormentor. If he thought begging Matt to leave him alone would work, he probably would have done that too. Despite everything that had happened though, he still ached to see Matt in every fibre of his being. He was his own worst enemy. He had done all this to himself.

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\* \* \* \*

Matt showered, washing the dried blood gingerly from his hair, and got changed. Then he sat in the kitchen and drank a large measure of Jack Daniel's while he looked out across his garden. It was Sunday tomorrow. He would go for a walk on the beach and maybe a swim if it was warm enough. He thought of sand dunes and warm lips on his. A sound in the hall distracted him, and he groaned as he heard Severine letting herself in and making her way to the kitchen.

"Good afternoon, Matthew. I trust your hangover is a little better. I've got some salmon here for your dinner and..." her voice trailed off and her mouth dropped open as he turned his head reluctantly to hers.

"Oh my God, who's done that to you?"



Matt wasn't going to name names, not when Severine liked James as much as she did. It would be unfair of him. "It's nothing," he muttered. "It's done with."

"It doesn't look like nothing. Where did you and Lewis go from here? To a bar? Someone hit you in a bar?"

"Please, Severine. It's okay."

She clicked her tongue, put her groceries down on the table and came to stand close to where he sat on his 261

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stool by the window. "Matthew. I don't know what to do with you. I worry so much about you, you're so sad and I don't know how to help you..."

Matt lowered his gaze abruptly from the concern in her dark eyes. "I'm okay."

"But you're not. If only you would... see someone... talk to someone..."

"I don't need that."

"But you do. What about James? Can't you talk to him?"

Matt's head snapped up.

"I mean, he was here last week. I thought maybe you and he were friends again. I'm sure he would listen if..."

"We're not friends," Matt said coldly.

"Why not? What happened? Why did he look so upset when he left?"

Matt opened his mouth to say she had overstepped the mark, that his personal life was none of her business, when Severine quickly spoke. "Forgive me. I don't mean to pry. I know it's none of my business. But I'm so fond of you, Matthew, and I worry so much about you."

Matt became suddenly choked. She put a hand on his shoulder, and he

appreciated the tenderness of her touch. It didn't make his skin crawl the way touches before 262

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James had.

"You can talk to me. Any time you want, I'm here for you."

She stepped back as he stood. "I'm going for a lie down. Just leave dinner in the fridge if you don't mind, I'll get it later."

"Okay sweetheart," Severine said sadly, and she turned back towards her shopping as he left the room.

Matt dozed for an hour behind the curtains of his bed. The house was quiet when he awoke. He pulled his shoes on and went downstairs, taking his keys and leaving the house.

He took the steps down the cliff to the beach, trying not to look at the dunes, trying not to work out which one he had kissed James on. He left the beach and made his way across the street and up the hill to the residential area.

He still knew his way even though it had been a while. He tried not to think too deeply as he walked, his left leg and pelvis complaining, because he didn't actually know what he was doing or what would happen when he reached his destination.

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## Chapter Twenty-Four

When the door opened, James didn't seem surprised to see him. Nor did he still look angry. In fact, their gaze only met for the briefest of moments, James' eyes flickering over Matt's injured face and filling with regret, before they moved simultaneously.

Matt stepped into the house. James' hand curled around the back of his neck and drew him close. Their lips met before the door even closed behind them.

James' kiss contained no anger or aggression, no frantic desperation; only tenderness, so it reminded Matt of their first kiss, when he'd lain in that electric bed high on morphine and had the kiss of an angel bestowed on him, setting him down this road to ruin. He didn't try to control the kiss; he touched James' tongue softly with his own, and the kiss stayed tender and gentle. One of James' hands slid up his shirt, moving over the contours and scars of his torso. Matt pressed himself eagerly into his touch, his hands on James' hips.

James' other hand tangled in Matt's hair. When his fingers brushed the staples on the top of his head, James'

touch faltered. Very delicately, Matt felt him trace the shape of each of the five staples with his index finger.

"I'm sorry," he gasped out against Matt's mouth.

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Matt shook his head. "It was my fault."

James' hands cupped Matt's face, his thumb tracing his cut cheek and the swelling along his jaw. His aquamarine eyes brimmed full. Rather than see this blatant display of feeling, Matt pulled him back into a kiss which was a little more fevered, his desire mounting. But the hands which touched James on his

back, his neck, his face, were still tender.

James' mouth burned him in its intensity, the kiss even more shockingly powerful than he remembered. Matt had never been kissed like this before in his life. He pressed himself to James; taking one of his hands and guiding it into his groin, desperate to be touched.

James murmured his appreciation against his lips at the evidence of Matt's arousal, and he started to rub the bulge in his pants. Matt groaned, grinding himself against James' hand, working himself up into a frenzy of need.

James kissed him a little harder, pressing him back into the wall, rubbing firmly but not seeking to unfasten Matt's pants until Matt thought he would lose his mind.

He kept his lips fixed on James', fingers digging into his back, moaning for more. To his shock, he felt his orgasm rising, and he pressed himself harder against James, wanting to be out in the open, wanting to be jerked off. He couldn't vocalise his need. If this had been a woman, Matt 265

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would have unfastened himself and forced her hand around him. But this was a man, and it was so wrong. He couldn't beg James to jerk him off, no matter how desperate he was for it, so instead he clutched at him and arched up once more against the palm rubbing him as he came shamefully quickly.

His face fell into James' neck, and he gasped a couple of times.

"Did you...?" James asked in a whisper, hand still tangled in Matt's hair, stroking.

"I did," Matt affirmed, eyes closed in embarrassment, face still hidden. James pressed a tender kiss to his forehead and then he let Matt go and moved away down the hall, disappearing through an archway at the end.

Matt rested back against the wall with his eyes shut, ashamed of the way he had lost the plot like some sort of teenager, coming before his pants were even open.

He imagined James smiling scornfully to himself in the kitchen about his performance, but he knew James didn't have a scornful bone in his body. There was nothing malicious or scheming about him. James was the most genuine person he had ever met.

What was he doing to him? Matt had used him and rejected him time and time again. Did James actually feel 266

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something for him, and why had Matt never stopped to consider his feelings before, when James had been so good to him?

He slunk up the stairs like a guilty cat and located the bathroom, where he cleaned up as best he could. On his way back, he couldn't resist pushing open the door to James' bedroom and just standing there looking inside for a few moments. In the gathering dusk it looked different than he remembered, but then Matt, drunk on alcohol and lust had not been focusing on the decor when he had had James on hands and knees begging for more. The bedroom was beautiful, so pale and tranquil and made for sleep with the sweetest of dreams. He recalled how he felt sitting in James' living room that night, looking over his garden with that table and chairs and fish pond, the flowers in bloom.

He had felt soothed and calm. He had also felt jealous. He wondered what it would be like to wake up in this room lying by James' side and dismissed his thoughts as post-orgasm fantasy where he always felt a little dreamy and soft.

He descended the stairs and found the object of his turmoil sat at the kitchen table with a bottle of bourbon open in front of him, and two glasses poured. The dying rays of the sun cast long fingers of shadow across the black and white tiled floor of the spacious kitchen, all gleaming 267

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fixtures and marble surfaces.

Matt took a seat in front of James and accepted the glass which he pushed towards him. For a moment he told himself automatically he could only drink this one, and then he remembered he was here on foot, that he hadn't driven a car for almost a year.

"Sorry about that," he found himself mumbling after a swallow of the fiery liquid.

"What?"

"That." Matt gestured with his head, over his shoulder, back towards the hallway.

"Why? Don't you think I'm flattered that I can make you come so quick?" James smiled for the first time in so long that Matt's heart seemed to shudder to a halt of remembrance before taking off at a gallop. It pounded so hard in his chest that he swore it would bounce through his healed ribs and onto the kitchen table, showing Matt's adoration for James effortlessly.

He averted his eyes, struggling to maintain control, fighting with himself not to drag James out of his chair and onto his knee and kiss him senseless. Outside the French windows, he noticed a black face pressed to the glass, emitting a faint yowl.

"Who's that?" He gestured, glad of the distraction.

James looked over his shoulder. "Oh," he said with 268

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another smile, this time directed towards the feline. He got up and slid open the window. "This is Sooty."

A large cat entered the kitchen and stalked confidently towards the table, zeroing in on Matt as animals always tended to do. Matt bent down and held his hand out.

The cat blinked at him with implacable green eyes then arched its spine, tail in the air, and rubbed its face into Matt's hand.

Matt's fingers touched silky fur, and he stroked the cat's head, moving down its back to the tip of its tail. Sooty was as sensual and receptive a creature as his owner. Matt could not help but smile to himself.

"What?" James asked, taking his seat.

"Nothing. He just reminds me of you, that's all."

James smiled self-consciously. "That *has* been said before."

Matt's thoughts darkened. He imagined another man sitting in his place, stroking Sooty and making this remark to James. *You're not the first, and you won't be the last*, he reminded himself, *no matter how much you wish you were*.

"I need to ask you something." Matt sat back in his chair as Sooty wandered off towards a pair of porcelain bowls by the radiator and started to crunch biscuits loudly.

Their gazes met; James' wary with good reason.

"Go on," he said as though he knew what was 269

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coming.

"How many men have you slept with?"

James averted his eyes and toyed with his glass. "Is this about the condom thing last night? Because I told you..."

Ignoring him, Matt said, "Answer the question."

James looked up, his eyes searching Matt's a moment. "Two. Before you."

Matt was both surprised and not. Surprised that James hadn't had more partners with his incredible physical attributes and yet not surprised, because James carried an air of such innocence when he lay beneath Matt moaning with pleasure.

"Who was your last?" He felt the need to ask even though jealousy burned in his bitter heart.

James hesitated before replying. "David."

Matt stared. "What? David who was my nurse after you?"

James reddened. "We were together eight years."

Matt felt a pain in his chest. Eight years. David had woken up beside James for eight years. He had known every aspect of James intimately. This man had nursed Matt for a month after James had quit, while Matt had never suspected he had owned James' heart for eight years.

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "When did you split 270

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up?"

"Seven months ago."

"Just before you came to work for me?" Oh God, the wounds had still been fresh for James. He had been sleeping with Matt for one reason only: he was on the rebound from David.

James nodded.

"Why?"

"What?" James was starting to look deeply upset by this conversation.

Matt couldn't stop now. "Why did you split up?"

James took a moment to gather his words. "We weren't in love anymore."

Matt's heart almost smiled, until James added, "At least, that's what we thought it was."



"So you're not sure?"

James shook his head.

"You might get back together?"

James shrugged. "Maybe."

Matt took a big swallow of his drink. Inside he howled. All the way through this strange obsession with James, he had naively thought they were the only two people involved in this. That he could work through and struggle with his feelings, safe in the knowledge that James wasn't having anyone else. Even Michael had never been 271

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confirmed, and Matt had clung onto the hope that he had been wrong about that. Now those foundations were rocked. James was bringing unwelcome history to the bed.

David was clearly very much part of the situation.

"Are you fucking him now?"

"No Matt, I already told you..."

"Do you think about him when I fuck you?"

James frowned. "No." He reached across the table to touch his hand. Matt drew it back.

"Who was your first?"

"A guy named Jake in college. It lasted a year, and then he moved away."

James didn't do one-night stands, as he had already told him.

"What about Michael?"

James shook his head. "No."

All the anguish Michael had caused Matt had been for nothing. He had beaten him in that bar for no reason.

"Did you use condoms?"

"Yes."

"You used condoms for *eight years* with David?"

Matt demanded cynically.

"We were both tested for HIV after two years. Then we didn't use them after that."

Matt raised an eyebrow. "And you trusted him for 272

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six years? He didn't cheat on you?"

"You obviously find fidelity a hard concept to accept," James said sarcastically, causing Matt's face to heat. "He was faithful to me for eight years. I know that without a shadow of a doubt."

"And you?"

"Me too." James bristled, his eyes flashing.

Matt still wasn't satisfied. "How many women have you had?"

"Four. All with condoms, before you ask. Now how about I cross-examine you?"

"I already told you last night." His mind did the math. God, James had only had six people in his life before Matt, and Matt dared to give him this inquisition when he'd probably had at least four times that amount. "I've always used a condom since I lost my virginity at seventeen."

"Maybe I want to know how many men and women you've slept with. Fair's fair."

"I haven't slept with any men, you son of a bitch,"

Matt hissed.

"Don't I count?"

"Yes, you fucking count," Matt huffed, because James counted more than he would ever admit.

"So how many women?"

Matt looked away. "A few."

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"You fucking hypocrite."

Matt's gaze whipped to his. James' face was cold as ice.

"So you came here to get my sexual history before you wash your hands of me, am I right?"

James read him far too easily. Matt nodded tersely.

He stood up. As he turned away, James caught his wrist, his grip light but nevertheless keeping Matt in place.

"So if I ask you to come upstairs now for one last time, you'll say no?"

Twilight was falling rapidly, and his eyes were washed of colour in the shadowy room. His skin burned Matt's. Matt only hesitated a moment before he turned and walked away.

When James entered his bedroom, Matt was already getting undressed; shoeless

and shirtless, unbuttoning his jeans, sliding the denim down his legs, revealing his scars.

For a moment James watched him by the door, then he crossed to close the curtains just as Matt finished and stood naked by the bed, waiting. James flicked on the bedside lamp, which Matt didn't mind. If James had been a woman, he would have asked to do it in the dark, but James had seen Matt's scars, and kissed them. He was the only one who understood, the only one who saw past them.

James started to pull his own shirt off, before Matt 274

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moved to him quickly. "No," he said, hands on James'. "Let me undress you."

James acquiesced wordlessly, lifting his arms while Matt stripped the shirt from his body. Matt's hands moved over his torso, tracing the bones and the muscle, rubbing at his nipples, squeezing them lightly between thumb and forefinger. He pushed James onto the edge of the bed, unfastened his shoes, pulled them off, peeled off his socks, then started to work on his jeans.

When he had stripped James fully, Matt sank to the floor between his knees. He took James' erection in his hand and lowered his mouth over it, sucking it inside.

James made a sound in his throat. His fingers traced the staples in Matt's head once more as Matt sucked.

*I'll never do this again, he thought, either with James or with another man. So I better make it good. Give him something to remember me by.* He watched James' face from beneath his lashes as he flicked his tongue wetly over the head of his cock and down the shaft. After a few minutes, James put a hand under his chin. "Stop," he said breathlessly.

Matt looked up at him, pulling free a moment. "I don't want to stop. I want to taste you. Let me."

James moaned a little. He drew Matt's head back to him, and Matt carried on.

James' sounds increased his 275

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rhythm. Unbearably aroused, he fondled James' balls with one hand while his other strayed to touch himself.

As much as he wanted James to come like this, though, he hoped that wouldn't be all they would do that evening. He hoped James would recover in a few minutes and let Matt have his wicked way.

His thoughts made him sigh softly around James'

cock. James gave a gasp, and his hand tightened in Matt's hair. He moaned out Matt's name and bucked upwards as he came. Matt swallowed quickly, grimacing at the taste, but unwilling to ruin the moment by running and spitting.

He drew back, licking at the semen still dribbling from the slit and let his hand continue to work at himself as he looked up at James' rapturous post-orgasmic face. He came with a groan, and his head dropped onto James' thigh.

"You should have let me do that," James murmured.

Matt lifted his head, and James' hands brought him quickly to his feet and drew him close, his tongue coming out to lick at his softening cock.

Matt groaned at the exquisite sensation on his sensitive skin as James' tongue thoroughly cleaned him up.

Then he took Matt's wrist in his hand, and with gaze locked on his, brought his palm to his mouth and licked the semen from it.

"Fuck." Matt's cock twitched again at the hotness of 276

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this image. James drew each of his fingers into his mouth, sucking sensually as

he looked up at Matt through his thick lashes.

When Matt's hand was clean and he started to stiffen once more, James moved across the bed and slid beneath the covers, leaving them turned back, waiting for Matt to join him. Matt didn't need asking twice.

He moved into James' arms and their mouths locked, each responding fiercely, kissing until they were both ready once more. Matt pinned James beneath him and scrabbled in his bedside drawer where he knew James kept condoms and lubricant.

James spread his legs around Matt, looking up at him with virtually black eyes as Matt stroked him with lubricated fingers. James squirmed beneath him, gasping out, "Matt, make love to me, please..."

His eyes were half-closed, head thrown back, hands gripping Matt's hips. Matt was arrested by how beautiful he was in that moment. James had said *make love*, not *fuck*. He had made a distinction. He saw what he and Matt did as making love. Matt was inclined to agree. He rolled his condom on quickly, then he lifted James' thighs around his back and penetrated him swiftly.

His lover cried out and then smothered it with his knuckles. It still amazed Matt how James took him at all.

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What would it be like to take James, who wasn't much smaller than himself? He could bet it would hurt like a bitch, but then Matt knew a thing or two about pain. It wouldn't hurt the way a shattered pelvis hurt.

He took a few moments to build his rhythm, not holding back, giving James the full force of his desire this one last time. James trembled with each slick slide into his depths, his hands clawing at Matt's back. Matt saw both pain and pleasure on his face, a trickle of water coming from beneath his closed lashes.

He stared a moment, then he turned James' face to his with one hand and kissed

him. James moaned softly. *Oh God*, the thought seared Matt's brain, *please let this never end*. He sat back and pulled James by the hips almost onto his lap. Then he started to jerk him off.

James' lean torso undulated beneath him with every thrust, his arms flung above his head as though in surrender to Matt. He took gasps for breath, and his cock leaked in Matt's hand, rock hard.

"Come on," Matt urged, his voice low and excited, thrusting even faster and watching James' face.

James cried out. He arched up off the bed, his muscles convulsing, his hands gripping Matt's hips to pull him closer and deeper. Matt crushed him to the bed, kissing him as James spurted between their bodies, his teeth 278

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catching Matt's lip.

The orgasm swept through his body, and he groaned out James' name as he came, collapsing on him, James'

arms and legs wrapped tightly around him. The only sound was that of their breathing.

Matt eased himself free and lay on his back. He touched his mouth and looked at the blood on his fingers.

"Sorry," James said sheepishly beside him.

"It's fine," Matt responded. "I'm sorry if I hurt you."

James shook his head. "You didn't." His eyes were red, and they avoided Matt's gaze. In a quiet voice, he said,

"Why won't you admit you have feelings for me?"

"I don't. It's just sex."

"Is that so? So what have we got here? Are you my fuck buddy?"

"Don't use that expression. I hate it," Matt snapped immediately, eyes fixed on the ceiling rather than on his lover during this uncomfortable conversation.

"Well it seems like that's how you think of me. If you want me just for sex, we may as well work out a mutually beneficial arrangement."

Matt's head turned, staring at James. "What? You want to be my fuck buddy?"

James stared back unblinkingly, way too calm.

"Sure."

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Matt couldn't speak. For pure, innocent, James to come out with something like this was highly unsettling and out of character. "I can't do that. I'm sorry," he said firmly. "There's something not right about it."

"Not right?" James echoed. "We're both adults.

We're not hurting anyone. Haven't you always wanted sex on tap whenever you need it?"

Incredibly, Matt felt himself start to stiffen for the fourth time. "And you would be on tap for me twenty-four seven, would you?"

"Within reason." James gave a yawn. "I do have a job to go to, you know."

Matt stared at him suspiciously. "You sound like you're offering to be my whore."

"You do know how to make a guy feel special."

"There you go again, bringing feelings into it," Matt growled, sitting up. "This is the reason why I can't do this. I don't feel the way you do."



"And what way would that be?"

"You know. What Lewis said."

"What do you mean?"

James' innocent act angered him. "What you said to Lewis when you finished working for me. Do I need to embarrass you by spelling it out? You said you felt a little too much for me."

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James reddened and averted his eyes. "I had that all wrong," he murmured. "I was hard for you, infatuated by your beauty. I realise now that was all I felt. I could never fall in love with you. You could never give me what I need."

"Which is?" Matt demanded. He didn't know why he felt so angry by James' statement rather than relieved.

He didn't know why that lump in his throat choked him every time he was with James.

James turned his head, blue-green eyes cold and angry. "Why do you care? I'm not about to discuss that with you. From now on, we don't need to speak at all, just fuck."

Matt held his confrontational gaze, and his own anger slid away into confusion and regret. He wasn't sure he liked this new sexually aggressive James. It made him uncomfortable, used as he was to being the dominant male with women. But James wasn't a woman, he was as much of a man as Matt, and Matt shouldn't expect him to act like one.

"So..." James spoke up coolly in the silence. "Want to do it again?"

"No." All Matt's reawakening desire for James was gone, replaced by pique.

James turned over on his side, back turned. "Show yourself out then. You know where I am when you want 281

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more."

"You're behaving like a prick."

"No. I'm just not letting you control this situation —  
or *me*— anymore."

Matt put a rough hand on his shoulder and flipped James over onto his back. "So you want to be in control, do you?"

"It's not about any of us being in control. It's about us both getting satisfaction when we want it. That's all that matters."

"You make it sound so cold and clinical."

"Isn't that the way you want it?"

Matt did not reply to this. Instead he said, "I never said I even agreed to being fuck buddies."

"Fine." James turned his back once more. "Go away and think about it then. If I don't hear from you, then I'll know you don't want to play anymore."

Matt stared at him for a moment. He was so blind with anger that for an instant he considered taking James again, pinning him down and *really* hurting him this time.

Instead he rolled away. "Asshole." He got up and searched for his clothes on the floor, pulling them on more quickly than he had taken them off.

When he straightened up from tying his shoelaces, he felt a shape brush against his legs and looked down.

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Sooty looked up at him and meowed. Matt bent down and stroked the cat's spine.

He hesitated before he moved around the bed and stood over James, looking down. James had his face half-turned into the pillow, and although his body stiffened with the knowledge Matt was standing there, he didn't lift his head to look. Matt leaned down. He traced the curve of James' soft cheek a moment with his fingertips, before pressing his lips to it, leaving them there a second in the most tender gesture he had ever used towards James. Then he stood up and left the room, closing the door behind him.

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## Chapter Twenty-Five

James lay on the rumpled bed sheets naked. He'd done it, he'd actually done it. Offered to be Matt's fuck buddy in desperation just to stay physically close to the man. What a pathetic idiot he was. Giving himself up to be used and thrown away again and again and again, until Matt got tired of him and decided to go back to being straight. But the fringe benefits were good. Matt was a stallion. He had got it up three times in a row at James'

house that evening, and his stamina enhanced James' own effortlessly. It seemed all James had ever done was walk around permanently hard from the first time he had met Matt. But loveless sex could only satisfy him for so long.

Soon he'd be helplessly letting Matt see how he felt about him, and Matt would finish it once and for all once James became needy and clingy. What had he done? This could only end up one way. With him broken and devastated.

\* \* \* \*

Matt went home and climbed into the shower. It seemed all he did these days was wash James guiltily from him. Had James really just made him that offer? To be his fuck buddy for God's sake? To lie on his back for Matt 284

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whenever he wanted? Jesus, he was getting hard again just thinking about it.

He tried to finish off his shower without thinking about James, just for once, lathering shampoo into his hair furiously, but it was pointless. God, would it have been so wrong to accept James' offer? To call up the man when he needed him, then throw him out afterwards? James would accept that, because he would understand the score. They wouldn't even have to talk. They could fuck in the dark so he couldn't see those goddamn eyes of James', which undid him at every turn. He groaned, forehead falling against the cool tiles, eyes closed. I can't. I *can't*.

He launched himself out of the shower, grabbed a towel and tied it around his waist as he went back into the bedroom and found his cell on the bed.

"I want you to come over right now. I need to fuck you," he said without preamble when James answered the phone. "We'll do whatever you want. I can do fuck buddies.

No strings, just sex..." He was babbling. He shut up abruptly for James to get a word in.

"I don't come when you call after all the shit you just spouted at me." James' voice was cold and hard.

"I'm sorry, come on, don't fucking tease me this way. I *want* you."

"I'll be half an hour," James said finally after a long 285

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silence.

"Okay." Lascivious anticipation and relief swept through Matt. "Let yourself in, there's a key under the red pot near the front door."

James hung up without another word.

Matt dried himself, brushed his teeth and crawled into bed with his hair still damp. He waited for James with heart pounding, ears straining for the sound of a key in the lock. Slowly, fighting it, he fell into exhausted sleep.

He became aware of a touch on his hip, of the mattress and covers shifting around him, of warmth behind him. He tried to wake up, but he couldn't struggle up from layers of heavy sleep. An arm wrapped around him, and then all was still. He fell beneath the surface once more.

\* \* \* \*

Matt woke slowly to a pressure on his side, a heat against him which he

identified as bare flesh touching his, a completely unfamiliar sensation to wake up to. He opened his eyes and stared into sea-green ones up close and personal.

In shock, he jerked away from the arm which held him, the nose which almost touched his. He rolled onto his back, cursing.

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"Good morning to you too, Matt," James said sardonically. "You asked me to come here remember? I know I need a shave, but do I really look so bad first thing in the morning?"

Far from it. James was the most beautiful creature Matt had ever shared a bed with. His throat felt tight, his groin felt even tighter.

"I didn't think you'd still be here," he muttered.

"In case you don't remember, you called me over to fuck. You were asleep when I got here. What's a man supposed to do? Go home again? I was tired." James sounded petulant.

Matt looked at him a moment. Jesus, he had actually woken up with James in his bed. He had his hottest fantasy lying right next to him, and he was actually going to kick him out?

"Shall I go?"

Wordlessly, Matt shook his head. He lay still, waiting for James to make the first move, which he did. He leaned over Matt, those intense eyes coming closer and closer until his lashes fell closed and James kissed him tenderly.

Matt drew in his breath at the exquisite touch of his lips. He put an arm around James' back and dragged him down onto him, a leg sliding between his, an erection 287

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nudging his hip. He slid below dark, delicious waves and abandoned himself to James.

They made love slowly and leisurely, as befitted a Sunday morning, with James on top, riding Matt. Leaning over, he held Matt's hands down by his head, their fingers entwined tightly, small gasps coming from James' mouth, dark lashes trembling on his cheeks. Matt kept his eyes open, admiring the view, trying to stop himself making noise, when really he wanted to cry out to the heavens in his bliss, to moan and shriek and groan his appreciation at the top of his lungs. He bit his lip hard and turned his face away, trying to bury it in the pillow, not wanting James to open his eyes and see the pleasure so blatantly on his face, not wanting his lover to think he was somehow in control of making Matt happy, even though he so clearly was.

Matt came first, struggling up from post-orgasmic bliss with difficulty, to turn his attention to his lover. He moved his hand on James, thrusting up until James began to shudder. He sat back, hands braced on Matt's chest. The long arch of his neck was almost poetic, as was the tremor of his Adam's apple as he swallowed and cried out, spurting semen into Matt's hand and across his chest. Below him, Matt could only watch in fascination. He could only think dazedly that he wanted this every morning for the rest of his life.

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James slowly slid off him and fell by his side. Matt lay still. His heart and breathing slowed gradually, then a voice interrupted his thoughts. "Was that okay?"

He turned his head to look at James in confusion.

"What?"

"Was it okay? You were kind of... quiet. I thought maybe you didn't enjoy it."

Matt frowned at him. James had performance anxiety? The man who had given Matt the time of his life, every time, *five* times, actually thought he didn't *enjoy* it?

Christ, if only he knew. "If I didn't enjoy it, I assure you you'd be the first to know," he said a little coldly. "You don't really need to ask me that."

"Oh, I see. That's one of the fuck buddy rules is it?

We don't talk? I don't get to ask you if you enjoyed it?"

"I didn't know we'd set any rules yet, but yeah, you yourself said it last night didn't you? We don't talk, we fuck."

James held eye contact with him for a long moment.

"Yeah," he said finally, turning his head away, obviously pissed off. "Want me to go now?"

Matt thought for a moment. He tingled all over with the warmth of James by his side, the clean scent of him invading his nose. He felt a sleepy satisfaction at what he had been given that morning. "No."

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Silence descended again, and the two lay still. After only a few minutes each turned towards the other, body melding against body, Matt's head seeking the crook of James' shoulder, an arm around him, eyes closed. They held each other for the longest time, both slipping slowly towards sleep once more.

A knock on the door startled them both awake.

"Shit." Matt let go of James and slid from the bed. He pulled on a pair of boxers before yanking the curtains across the four-poster to hide his lover.

He went to the door and opened it. Severine smiled at him a little bashfully.



"Good morning, Matthew. I didn't like to come in. I saw the car in the driveway and figured you had a guest."

Matt tried to mumble something and failed, reddening to his ears.

Severine on the other hand, appeared delighted by this confirmation. Her eyes strayed past him to the room behind, and he closed the door a little. "Would you like me to bring double breakfast? Does your friend have a good appetite?"

"Yes... yes," Matt muttered, thinking of James'

appetite in great detail and how he'd like to savour it once more before his lover went home.

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"Okay then." Severine beamed at him. She turned and walked away.

Matt closed the door. As he turned back to the bed he saw the pile of James' clothes neatly folded on the chair behind him, the pair of highly polished black shoes on the floor next to them, smaller than Matt's.

He groaned and climbed back into bed, where James greeted him by moving up to him and laying his head on his chest.

"What's wrong?"

"I think Severine saw your clothes."

"She probably also saw my car," James replied.

"She must remember it's mine."

Matt cursed. He put a hand up and stroked James'

hair absently. "Christ, she's going to quit and spread it around town that I'm a fag."

"Listen to yourself," James chastised, lifting his head, gaze fixed on Matt. "Why do you insist on beating yourself up like this is the most terrible thing you ever did in your life?"

"Because it is."

"Then stop," James said in a low, serious voice.

Their eyes held for a long, unwavering moment before Matt tangled a hand in his lover's hair and pulled him down into a kiss. If only he could.

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The kiss was gentle. The two shifted onto their sides as they explored each other's mouths with tongues, hands moving leisurely over bare skin, all the urgency of previous times gone. James stiffened against Matt, and his breath hitched in his throat as they kissed, his bones seeming to turn to liquid in Matt's hands. Matt's mouth grazed James'

collarbone. His fingertips moved over his chest, stroking and rubbing each nipple, before his hands encircled his waist, slipping lower to cup the firm cheeks of his bottom and draw James against him.

James let out a groan as their erections pressed together. His hands clutched at Matt's shoulders, and his head fell back further so Matt had full, greedy access to his throat, which he covered in lingering kisses. As he did, he glanced up at the dark lashes covering James' eyes. His lips parted slightly, showing his perfect teeth. That familiar ache returned in his chest, and Matt lifted his head. James'

eyes slowly opened and focused on his. "What?"

Matt shook his head. Desire had sent him breathless. One hand touched James' face, tracing the curve of his stubbled jaw. He was afraid of the longing which swept through him, a longing for so much more than sex.

He kissed James again, a little harder, wanting the physical act to obliterate the

need to think. Their bodies fit together, both pelvises deliberately rubbing against the other, 292

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creating friction as they both panted against the other's mouth.

Another knock came at the door. Both froze, eyes opening and lust slowly retreating. James smiled ruefully and stroked Matt's cheek almost tenderly. Matt slid away from him quickly and pulled the curtains behind him again.

He opened the door to see two breakfast trays on the floor outside, heaped with a mountain of food. *She knows. Why would she leave so much food for a woman?*

He took the trays to the bed, and James slid up to a seated position, the covers falling to his waist, his chiselled torso distracting Matt again far too easily. The two ate in silence, and Matt noticed James only picked, staying away from the pancakes and the eggs, choosing the strawberries, the figs and the fresh chunks of melon.

"Aren't you hungry?" he asked after a sip of his coffee.

James shrugged. "Not really. It's kind of weird when..." He averted his eyes. Matt knew what James meant. This whole situation was bizarre. As of last night, James was his fuck buddy. Matt was supposed to have kicked his ass out before the morning, and now here he was sharing breakfast with him. Matt had never had anyone in this bed before, in all the years he had lived in this house.

He'd never shared breakfast with anyone, least of all a man.

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As though James read his thoughts, he murmured,

"Do you do this a lot?"

Matt frowned. "What? Get my housekeeper to make my partners breakfast?"

James nodded.

Matt took a moment to answer. Finally he said defensively, "You don't get to ask me that."

James gave a little sigh and leaned back against the pillow. "Are you going to be sleeping with other people while we're... doing this?"

"Is that a rule you're making?" Matt asked coolly. "I knew you'd start with this."

James shook his head. "It's not a rule, but I'd rather you didn't."

"Why?"

"I just..." James trailed off helplessly.

"Are *you*?"

James shook his head. "You already know my sexual history Matt. I wouldn't sleep with two people at once."

Matt didn't speak. At the moment, with his thoughts completely consumed by James, he felt blinkered by this man. He couldn't imagine ever looking around at anyone else, but then he was sure that feeling would change.

Sooner or later this obsession would break. He looked into 294

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James' eyes and found them large with sorrow. What was he doing to him? What feelings lurked behind those eyes?

"I thought we came to an agreement last night," he said quietly. "If you can't handle this..."

"I can," James said quickly. "I know the score."

"Are you sure? Because you seem kind of naïve to me. I wouldn't want you to have... expectations."

"Out of the two of us, you're the one who's naive,"

James said, not unkindly.

"Meaning?"

"I don't think you've ever lived in the real world. I have. For too long. I know what's going on here, and I don't have any... expectations, as you so charmingly put it."

Matt bristled in anger. He climbed off the bed and removed both breakfast trays. "You can go now."

"Come on, don't. I don't want to fight with you every time."

"I'm showering. Be gone when I get back." Matt closed the bathroom door firmly.

It wasn't possible for him to feel any worse as he stood under the shower thinking that he could have been pressing James to these tiles and feeling the man coming around him if only he had not ruined their perfect morning.

He thought of the sleep he had just had, how he had felt that touch on his skin late last night and from then on, slept 295

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the dreamless sleep of the dead, the way he hadn't since his accident. He had spent the night with James, his fuck buddy, the man he was supposed to be having frequent nostrings sex with. The man who consumed his every word, thought, and deed to the exclusion of everything else. The man he lived and breathed. His thoughts terrified him. He didn't want to feel this way.

He had to somehow break the cycle and find the courage to put James aside once and for all. But his body worked independently of his mind, as it always seemed to do where James was concerned. He got out of the shower, dragged a towel quickly around his waist and exited the bathroom anxiously. The first thing he saw was the empty bed, the covers drawn up neatly, the wrinkles smoothed from them. His gaze swivelled to the empty chair where the clothes had been folded, and he ached at what he had done.

He moved to the window, drew the curtain back and looked down.

James sat inside his car on the driveway. Matt turned around, fumbled some clothes from his wardrobe and dragged them on, pulling a hoodie on in case it was cold. Then he rubbed his wet hair a little and hurried from the bedroom. He descended the stairs as fast as his injured leg would allow him, took his keys and left the house.

Outside, he tried to slow his breathing and appear calm.

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He walked over to James' car and looked through the driver's window. James sat with head on the steering wheel, face hidden, one hand clutching it, his knuckles white. Matt stood there for a long moment, until James suddenly sensed him there and his head jerked up, startled.

He wore mirrored sunglasses. He fumbled his key into the ignition and pressed the button on the electric window. As the glass slid down, the stereo came on loud and Matt recognised the song, the distinctive piano of Guns N' Roses'

*November Rain.*

James jabbed at the volume button quickly then turned back to look at Matt. But Matt was having another crisis involving the proximity of James and *November Rain* to each other. That song had always done something to him, had often made the ice man feel something approaching emotion. All he wanted was to climb into the back seat of that car, move James beneath him and make the

sweetest love to him, to that song.

James started the engine, and the big car purred smoothly. Still he looked at Matt, as though waiting for him to get the hell away from his car.

"Listen," Matt said quickly before he blew it all.

"I'm going walking on the beach, want to come?" He almost held his breath for the reply. If James said no, then it was a long, lonely Sunday without him that he wasn't sure 297

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he could make it through.

James seemed to look at him for an eternity. Matt saw himself reflected in the lenses of his sunglasses and disliked what he saw on his face. His eyes were large with need and a certain type of desperation. God, he was pathetic. He turned away abruptly from the car and moved swiftly down the drive, going as fast as he could, moving through the garden and to the steps leading down the cliff.

Behind him a car door slammed and footsteps followed. Matt's heart lurched up painfully and gratefully and he slowed his steps. As he reached the top step, he turned and looked back. James came up behind him, the sunglasses gone, wearing the clothes which looked so much better on Matt's bedroom chair, a black T-shirt with a pattern splattered in white across it and tight black jeans with a studded belt. The lump in Matt's throat increased. He took a step forward, reached out and encircled one firm, muscular bicep, squeezing lightly, his fingers savouring the feel of the silky soft skin.

Oh God he wanted to kiss James so badly.

Reminding himself they were in public, he tore himself away and set off down the steps.

They reached the beach and walked slowly along the damp sand at the edge of the incoming tide. The day was overcast and surprisingly chilly for September,

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Matt was glad he'd dressed right. After a hundred yards of silence he realised James shivered beside him.

He glanced at him a couple of times before decisively stripping off his hoodie and handing it over.

James shook his head. The two came to a halt, facing each other. "Take it," Matt said. "I don't need it."

James hesitated. His pale arms were covered in goose-pimples. He took the hoodie with murmured thanks and pulled it on, giving Matt a very juvenile thought. When he got it back, it would smell of James. When he wasn't beside him, Matt could sleep with the hoodie.

He skipped out of the way of a rogue wave and almost knocked James over. He cursed, grabbed the other man's arm to steady him, then let go of him lightning fast and looked around with paranoid eyes. He did right to be paranoid. Up ahead of them, approaching fast, were Lewis and Nick.

"Fuck it," Matt groaned under his breath. His friends exchanged quiet words, and their eyes gleamed with something approaching triumph as they got up close.

"Hey guys," Nick said with a smirk.

Lewis still looked a little pissed off, but delight at seeing Matt and James together had rubbed some of the sharp edges off that.

"What're you doing?" Nick asked.

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"Er... well, Nick," Matt said thoughtfully, "weaving some baskets. What are *you* doing?"

Nick rolled his eyes at James. "When are you going to beat this sarcasm out of him, dude?" he asked. He spoke to him as though Matt and James were a couple. Matt was beyond embarrassed.

Before he could try and worm himself away though, Lewis asked, "Want to come for coffee?" He gestured back along the beach to the little café near the pier.

Matt held eye contact with him a moment. He owed Lewis after the scene in the china shop yesterday. He owed James too; he owed not acting like an asshole to him in front of his friends. But all he wanted right then was to be back under the covers of his bed with James belonging solely to him.

He glanced at him as though to ask his permission.

James nodded, looking reluctant. Matt liked to think it was for the same reason as him, but maybe it was more like he was anxious to go home and be free of Matt's company.

The four made their way up to the café and chose a window seat. "What are you having?" Matt asked James solicitously. "Anything to eat?"

"God, not after that breakfast."

Lewis and Nick exchanged looks. James ordered a latte and disappeared to the bathroom as soon as the waiter 300

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had gone.

"Out with it. Right now," Nick said in a steel voice as soon as James left the table.

"Christ," Matt muttered.

" *He* can't help you. Tell us right now," Lewis added,

"or so help me, I will ask you in front of James as soon as he comes back."

"Okay, okay," Matt said hurriedly, looking anxiously towards the bathroom.

"We've come to an arrangement."

"What sort of arrangement?" Nick demanded.

"A fuck buddy arrangement."

"What the fuck?" Lewis' blue eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Matt, you and he aren't any kind of fuck buddies. There's fucking *more* to you than that."

Matt shook his head. "That's all, Lewis. We agreed."

"What bullshit," Lewis exploded, causing Nick to place a hand on his and shush him as James came out of the bathroom. "This will keep 'til later," Lewis warned in an undertone as James sat down and looked around the table suspiciously.

"So," Nick smiled, "you really worked Matt over yesterday. Not many men have done that and lived to tell the tale."

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James flushed. "I didn't mean it. He knows that," he mumbled, looking down at the table.

"Shut up, Nick," Matt said angrily. "We don't need to do this."

Under the table, James' hand came to rest on his knee, and Matt tensed all over. Before his accident, he would have broken any man's hand who dared to do this.

Now he sat still and allowed the heat of James' hand to sear through his pants, down through his skin and into his very blood.

Lewis cleared his throat. "Anyone seen any good movies lately?"

Matt smiled wryly in gratitude, even though he knew he was not off the hook with Lewis.

Matt made his excuses to leave once he had finished his coffee and James stood up with him. "Call me," Lewis told Matt. "You too, man," he added to James who nodded and wished him and Nick goodbye.

Matt made his grateful exit back onto the beach with James in tow and sighed loudly.

"It wasn't that bad," James said teasingly.

"Wasn't it? I'm going to get the third fucking degree later on."

James didn't speak. They approached the steps up the cliff in a few minutes and Matt followed James up. He 302

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couldn't help his gaze straying to that lovely ass; outlined in those tight jeans, and his fingers itched to touch. It was all he could do not to help himself right then.

"I have to go home," James said as they reached his car. "I've got an early start tomorrow, and I've stuff to do."

"Oh, okay."

James stripped Matt's hoodie off and handed it to him. Matt took it wordlessly. Then James unlocked his car and climbed in, pausing with his hand on the door handle.

"I'll call you."

Matt nodded. "Sure."

James didn't smile. He pulled his door shut and started the engine. Matt stepped away as he drove off. He went inside the house and straight up to his room, even

though he heard Severine bustling in the kitchen, listening to music. He crawled onto his bed and lay holding his hoodie against him, inhaling the scent of James which lingered around the neck. He pressed his face into the pillow James had used and found the same scent. He cursed himself for the feeling of desolation which swept over him.

*Get a fucking grip. He's your fuck buddy; you can have him any time you want. You got more than enough this morning; it's no reason to want to spend the day with him like you're a chick. He's there to sate your lust on, not for fucking walks on the beach and cups of coffee with your 303*

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*friends.* He slammed his fist angrily against the pillow and rolled away, closing his eyes.

Some time had passed before Matt felt composed enough to go downstairs for a drink. He tensed as he reached the bottom of the stairs and realised Severine was still working in the kitchen. He almost tip-toed inside, nodded to her and moved to the fridge to pull out a carton of orange juice.

Severine reached out and turned the radio down.

"Have you had a nice day?"

"Sure," Matt muttered non-committally. Avoiding her gaze, he reached for a glass from the overhead cupboard.

"Is James staying for dinner?"

Matt had put the glass to his lips and now almost choked on the contents. His eyes went to Severine in panic, and his face heated.

"It's not..." he tried to say, then he stopped, because his housekeeper wasn't stupid, and there was no point trying to bluff his way out of the fact that she knew James had been in his bed that morning. He leaned on the work surface, head bowed, trying to think of something to say and feeling more ashamed than he had in a long while.

"Come on," Severine said softly behind him. "It's 304

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none of my business who you sleep with."

But Matt felt deep humiliation that someone else other than his gay friends knew his shameful secret.

Severine had always thought he was some butch ladies'

man. To find out such a dreadful thing about Matt must have disgusted her. He could not bear to look her in the face.

"I don't expect you to understand..." he began.

"I could see there was something between you when he worked for you," she responded. "He's such a nice boy.

He's good for you."

Matt's gaze jerked to hers. He could not find any words. He took his orange juice and fled from the room.

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## Chapter Twenty-Six

Monday mornings were always busy at work, and that day was no exception, but Nick came into his office wanting to talk and Matt couldn't shoo him away, try as he might.

"This fuck buddy thing, this is a joke, right?"

"Look, I've got a million suppliers to call. This isn't the time. Now get off my fucking case."

"I can't get off your case. You and him, you're just so perfect. Can you really not see how he feels about you?"

"I don't give a fuck how he feels about me. It's just sex, we agreed that. And besides, he told me he doesn't feel that way anymore. He was just confused."

"Oh fuck that," Nick snorted. "Open your eyes and come out of the dark before it's too late." He slammed his way out of Matt's office.

Matt sat back in his chair. He had been pretending to work all day anyway, and this scene had finally done for him. Thoughts of James utterly consumed him. He had barely slept all night for wishing James lay warm and drowsy beside him. He could just call him and ask him to come round and suck his cock, couldn't he? After all, he was his fuck buddy, that was surely in the rules, wasn't it?

But each time he took his cell up, terror seized him that 306

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maybe James would think he wanted more. Maybe James would think Matt had some deep feelings going on for him.

He couldn't stop thinking either about Severine's reaction to finding out he was sleeping with James. He had reminded himself time and time again during his

sleepless night that no one he knew had yet to castigate him over his choice of lover. The only person who had a problem with him and James was *him*.

His cell rang suddenly, startling him in the quiet of the office. He snatched it up and saw James' number, and was horrified at the way his heart sang with joy. He tried to answer coolly.

"Hey."

"Hey you, how's work?"

"Okay. You?"

"Pretty shitty. I don't finish 'til seven-thirty, but I wondered if maybe you wanted to come by mine later..."

Matt's heart beat so fast it made him feel sick. "Did you have something in mind?"

James laughed a little, sounding embarrassed. "You could say that. Is that a yes?"

"Depends what you had in mind." Matt heard his own voice, low and seductive and was appalled at himself.

A tent in his pants greeted him when he looked down.

James hesitated a moment. "If you're trying for a 307

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dirty phone call here, I'm not so good at them."

"Try."

Silence descended.

Matt tried again. "Tell me what you had in mind."

His hand lightly stroked the bulge in his pants.

"Your cock in my ass," James said in a whisper.

Matt let out a low groan. "You know I'm going to have to jerk off now, right?" His hand moved to unbuckle his belt.

"I'm flattered."

"You should be. I'll be thinking about you under me while I'm doing it."

"God..."

Matt took himself free from his unfastened pants and began to stroke his shaft. "Are you doing it too?"

"I can't. I'm at work in the goddamn bathroom."

"Fine. You can listen to me getting off then."

James let out a low moan.

Matt chuckled. "Tell me what else you want from tonight."

After a pause, James said, "To have you on your knees before me, sucking me off."

Matt leaned back in his chair, shuddering. His eyes closed, and his hand moved faster on his cock. "Christ, if you were here now, I'd bend you over my desk and fuck 308

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you to within an inch of your life."

James' breath quickened on the other end of the line. He gave a few stifled moans.

"You're doing it, aren't you?"

"Yes." James was breathless.



Matt closed his eyes and imagined James with his dick in his hand. "I swear you're going to have to recreate that scene for me tonight. Because imagining you jerking off is the hottest fucking thing I can think of."

"Oh Jesus... fuck..." came the exclamation at the other end of the line. That did it for Matt, and he came into his hand. He leaned back in his chair panting and listening to the heavy breathing on the other end of the line, deducing his partner hadn't come yet.

"Need some help there?" Matt asked coyly.

James gave an unintelligible moan.

"I'll take that as a yes. Think about what I'm going to do to you tonight, and that'll help you come. Maybe we won't even get up the stairs, and I'll take you in your hallway against the wall. And just think of the hard-on I'm going to have for you all fucking day and that it's going to be inside you within minutes of you getting home."

James gasped out a couple of expletives and went quiet.

Matt laughed softly. "God, that was better than any 309

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phone sex I ever had before. I'll see you later."

"Yeah," James said in a strangled voice.

Still laughing, Matt hung up and reached for some tissues on his desk. He felt way better than he should have.

He felt like this feeling would keep him warm all day.

It didn't. By seven fifteen he was showered and shaved and desperate. Pacing his bedroom, he checked his watch. He couldn't arrive at James' house before the man even got home from work. He tried to calm himself down, telling himself he would walk in, fuck James against the wall and walk back out again, as fuck

buddies do. It wasn't going to involve any after-sex kisses or cuddles or lying in that wonderful bed of his in that calm, tranquil room. And he was damned if he was going to stay the night and wake up feeling so goddamn happy at having James pressed against him all night.

Enough was enough. He called a cab, took his house keys and called goodbye to Severine, who was cleaning in the kitchen. The dinner Matt had refused now sat in the fridge for tomorrow. He stopped off on the way to buy some Chinese food, thinking James probably wouldn't have eaten, and he cursed himself all the way for behaving so thoughtfully towards his fuck buddy. *Fuck him, don't feed him.*

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Relief swept through him when he saw James' car already in the driveway when he got there, and Matt realised he would have been humiliated beyond belief if he had reached the house before him. He paid the cab driver and climbed the steep steps to the front door, standing in the fast-falling twilight after he had knocked.

The smile on James' face was so genuine that Matt's heart seemed to clench and spit out his blood hard. He beckoned to Matt to come in, holding the door open. He wore a dark blue scrub suit which for some reason did things to Matt that no uniform ever had before.

"Hey you..." James started to say, before Matt threw his bag of food down and shoved him against the wall.

Their lips collided fiercely. Matt's hands instantly reached under James' top, and James obediently lifted his arms as he stripped it off. Matt buried his face into James'

neck, kissing and nipping, hands tracing the muscles and bones of his back.

James groaned, fingers clumsy at the buttons on Matt's shirt before finally pulling it off his shoulders and tossing it aside. Matt gripped him by the buttocks and drew him closer, grinding their pelvises together through their clothes. As

James put his arms around his neck, Matt lifted him, swung his legs around his waist and turned away from 311

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the wall.

James gasped in surprise as Matt began to carry him up the stairs, kissing him all the way. Then he started to laugh and his arms tightened. "I never got carried to bed before."

Matt thought briefly of David trying to carry James to bed, and snorted with laughter. "I press more than you every day."

"You don't," James said dismissively.

"Am I even struggling here?" Matt reached the top of the stairs without being out of breath. There, he loosened one arm and mimicked dropping James. His lover clung on, laughing.

"Okay okay, you're fucking super-human. I'm going to carry you next time." They both laughed as Matt entered the dark bedroom and laid James down on the bed.

"Clothes off right now," he said, then turned away and began to undress, not wanting James to see how much pain his recovering bones were now giving him after that little stunt he had pulled. Truth be told, he felt sick with it, and he was actually beginning to wilt. Just like that night with Amber all over again.

"What's the matter?" James asked behind him when Matt was still for too long.

"Nothing."

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"Did you hurt yourself then?"

"I'm okay."

Gentle hands touched his naked hips, stroking the wounds on his pelvis. A mouth pressed to his shoulder.

"I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"For hurting you."

Matt turned around. He took James in his arms and held him close. "I hurt myself. You didn't hurt me."

James didn't speak. Perhaps he saw the symbolism in Matt's statement too. He drew Matt to the bed and lay down, his pale skin almost glowing in the dark.

Matt reached into the bedside drawer for supplies.

"How do you want me?" James asked, lounging there, knees open.

Matt hesitated. "On your face." He despised himself as soon as the words left him. Perhaps he thought the impersonal position might put some distance between them once more, remove that intimacy they had cultivated with their tender kisses and missionary positions. But no.

Fucking James was fucking James, no matter how Matt did it. More than just his cock was involved. Far more.

Once inside him and taking him slow and easy, that invisible string between them still connected him to James and tugged hard at his heart, pulling at his vocal cords and 313

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demanding he shout all sort of poetic words in the heat of his desire.

Matt grunted in frustration, wrapped both arms around James' torso and pulled him back onto his lap just like that first time, taking the dirty doggy position into vast intimacy once more. James writhed and moaned softly, head back against Matt's shoulder. Matt showered kisses on his neck and throat, on his cheek and his chin.

James turned his head and captured his mouth. As they kissed, moving slowly in rhythm, James guided Matt's hand between his legs. Matt was happy to oblige, stroking in time to his thrusts, using his other hand to caress James'

body.

He kept his pace slow, sensual, and James pushed down eagerly on him, trying to get Matt to up his movements. But Matt's hands kept James' hips still. He put his mouth to his ear.

"We have all night. I want you like this. Be patient."

James' head hung limply back, and he gasped a little in frustration. Then he seemed to gather himself together, and he slowly and gently rocked back against Matt's next thrust so the perfect rhythm started again.

The slow, aching climb to orgasm was like heaven, and Matt knew James felt it too. The sounds he made plucked Matt's heart strings and almost turned him inside 314

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out with need. Everything else receded for him apart from the body on his lap, the skin against his, the roaring of his own heart in his ears.

His mouth caught James' passionately. His lips buried in James' throat. Words spilled from Matt's mouth.

"You're the most amazing lover I ever had in my life."

"Don't stop, don't stop..." James cried in response, his voice trembling and broken, and Matt had to ask himself if James meant something more. He didn't

want to *ever* stop. He had lost his mind. There was only this.

Nothing else mattered.

The pace continued slow and gentle for another few minutes, until James sounded like he was almost sobbing with the need to come and Matt trembled right there on the edge. He gave one last thrust and threw himself into the fireworks it caused, letting James take him right over into the abyss.

Barely conscious for the longest time afterwards, Matt's head spun, his muscles and bones like jelly, a great lethargy on him like he'd not slept in days. When he came back to his senses, he had managed to move onto his side and James lay curled into him, face buried against his neck.

His left leg had gone to sleep, and he groaned when he moved it as his poor, damaged bones protested.

James lifted his head to look at him, eyes almost

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supernaturally green in the light spilling in from the landing. "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Don't pick me up like that again."

"You didn't enjoy it?"

"Of course I did. Who doesn't like getting carried to bed? I never had you down as such a romantic." James smiled sweetly. He trailed a hand down Matt's back, making him shiver.

Matt shrugged. "I can do romance. I'm not a caveman."

James kissed him softly, the passion lingering on his lips. "Did you bring food?"

"Yeah. Are you hungry?"

"Starving."

"Good. Let's go warm it up then."

They went downstairs, Matt in his boxers, James in pyjama bottoms and T-shirt. A familiar face hovered at the French windows, and James let Sooty in and put some food out for him as Matt heated their food up in the microwave.

The cat rubbed around his bare legs, purring, and James laughed. "You have the Sooty seal of approval."

Matt bent down and stroked the cat's head. He looked up to find James watching him, paused in his task of putting cat food in a bowl.

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Matt moved closer. His fingertips travelled down James' face to tilt his chin up, and he bestowed a light kiss on his lips.

James sighed softly when Matt let him go and turned away to put Sooty's dish down on his mat.

"What's the matter?"

James leaned against the sink. He averted his gaze as he spoke. "I like having you here. I'm sorry if that's wrong. I can't help that. You make me feel... warm."

Matt stayed silent. How did he voice that he felt the same, when this was supposed to be casual fucking? When he was still refusing to think of himself as homosexual?

There had been nothing cheap about the sex they had just had. Just like every time, it had been a meeting of hearts, minds and souls, not just bodies. "We agreed though..." he tried hopelessly.

"I know and I'm sorry," James said. "You make things so difficult." He glanced

at Matt. "Did you mean what you said before? When you said I was the best you ever had in your life?"

Matt looked away. "Shit James, I tend to lose my head when I'm having sex. I say all sorts. I'm sorry."

James made no reply. He pulled a bottle of wine from the fridge. "You okay to have a glass if you're...?" He stopped and turned around. "You're still not driving are 317

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you?"

Matt took the food to the table and sat down.

James brought the bottle and two glasses and set out some plates and forks. Then he sat opposite Matt as the two helped themselves. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Why aren't you driving? I thought you would be okay by now."

Matt twirled his fork into some noodles and sat there, looking at it.

"Are you afraid?"

Matt lifted his head and glowered at him.

"That's nothing to be ashamed of Matt," James said gently. "You almost lost your life in a crash. I would be afraid of driving again too."

Matt took the bottle and poured their glasses out, lifting one quickly to his lips. "I'll do it," he muttered. "I was just deciding what car to buy with the insurance money."

"But you've got another in your garage haven't you?"

There's no reason for you to be taking cabs everywhere when you have a car



sitting at home."

Matt didn't reply, only drank more wine. They ate in silence.

"I could come out with you in your car," James said 318

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finally, softly. "I could drive you somewhere quiet and then you could take over."

Matt stared hard at his food. His post-sex euphoria was finally starting to diminish. He finished his wine and stood up. "I should go." He took out his cell and began to dial a cab.

"You don't have to go," James said quietly.

Their eyes met. "What time do you have to get up for work?"

"I don't. I'm not working tomorrow."

"I wouldn't want to wake you up when I left," Matt said reluctantly.

"Then go in late. You're the boss aren't you?"

Matt's finger hovered over the connect button for the longest while, before he flipped his phone shut. "You're a bad influence," he said with a smile.

"I know."

Matt opened his phone again. "I'll just call Nick, tell him I'm taking the morning off."

"Sure," James said. "I'm going to grab a shower. I'll see you up there."

Matt's gaze followed James all the way up the stairs. *Fuck buddies*, a stern voice reminded him. He found Nick's number and connected.

"Hey." Nick was laughing at something, Lewis'

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distinctive giggle in the background.

"Hey, sorry to interrupt."

"You're not... just... fucking knock it off, Lewis,"

Nick shouted so Matt held the phone away from his ear.

"Sorry, Matt."

"Look, Nick. I'll be in late tomorrow. Twelve-ish.

Okay?"

"You're with James, aren't you?" Nick said instantly. He spoke away from the phone. "Matt's with James, he's not coming to work tomorrow." A yell of delight could be heard in the background and then a shout of " *high five!*" and hands slapping together.

"Knock it off."

Nick snorted with laughter. "When's the fucking wedding man?"

"Look, I told you the score with me and him, nothing's changed," Matt growled.

"Oh right yeah, sorry dude. Next you'll be telling me you're not a fag," Nick drawled.

Matt snapped his cell shut and threw it on the table.

He felt eyes boring into him and looked down.

James' cat stared up at him with seemingly silent accusation. "Sooty," Matt sighed. "Come here." He picked up the feline and cradled him in his arms. "Your owner's getting right under my skin, but you don't need to tell him 320

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that, okay?" Above his head, he heard the distant sound of water running, and his blood suddenly became molten with need.

He put the cat down. "Duty calls."

When he moved silently into the shower behind a lathered up James, his lover jumped as Matt's arms went around his waist and his mouth grazed his ear. "Sorry."

James purred in the same way his cat did as Matt started to kiss his neck, his hands travelling down James'

body. His head back against Matt's shoulder, he moaned softly as Matt stroked him slowly into erection.

James turned around in his arms holding a sponge.

"Can I wash you?"

"You can do whatever you want to me."

"Careful now, you wouldn't want to give me carte blanche," James said against his ear. "I'd do unspeakably wicked things to you."

Matt laughed uneasily. James poured shower gel on his sponge and set off soaping Matt's chest and arms. His touch was gentle as he knelt down, the sponge moving over the scars on Matt's abdomen and pelvis, down his thigh to the one on his leg. He washed both legs, then soaped Matt's groin lightly. Taking hold of his hard shaft, he ran the sponge all over it.

Matt closed his eyes as James turned him to face the

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wall and began washing his back and shoulders. As he did, he mouthed Matt's

neck lightly, his erection brushing Matt's buttocks. He knelt down again to wash calves and thighs, and then the sponge lightly moved in circles over his ass.

James dropped it into the shower tray. Both his hands gripped Matt's buttocks, squeezing gently. "You have the most amazing ass," he murmured, his breath warm on Matt's wet skin. "Do you know that?"

"No." Matt tensed as James started to plant loving kisses on each buttock.

"Well you do."

"Thank you very much." Matt almost yelped as a tongue ran over the very top of his cleft.

"You're very welcome. Perhaps I could show my appreciation?"

Matt tensed perceptibly. "What did you have in mind?"

A finger slid insidiously between his cheeks and stroked around his entrance, while a tongue followed it.

"This."

Matt jerked forward, almost banging his head on the wall. "I don't think so, thanks all the same."

"Why not?" James planted some more delicate and undeniably arousing kisses on Matt's cheeks.

Matt reached behind him and pushed James' head 322

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away. "Because I said not. Now knock it off." He turned around as James climbed to his feet.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't want you to do that." Matt tried to squeeze past him to get out of the

shower, but James held him back by one arm.

"Why not?" he repeated.

"Because I don't. You might like that, but it's not for me."

"How do you know until you've tried it?"

"Trust me on this one, James." Matt tried to push past him again.

"Hey." James held his arm firmly, looking into his eyes. "You do it to me, but I can't do it to you? Still telling yourself you're not gay if you don't let me touch your ass?"

Matt set his jaw. "I'm not even going to debate this with you. I fuck you and you clearly like it, so it suits both of us. I don't want you to fuck me or anything else like you just did because I'm not interested in exploring that option with you. If you don't like it, find some other guy who wants to go on bottom for you."

James' pale eyes became icy. "Maybe I will." He let go of Matt and climbed from the shower.

Matt needed the last word, and he regretted it as soon as he said it. "I doubt that. You don't seem like the 323

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kind of guy who goes on top to me."

James turned back to him, wrapping a towel around his waist. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing." Matt climbed out, helped himself to a towel off the rail.

"Then why say it, asshole?" James demanded. "Was it some sort of slur on my masculinity? What, you're so much better than me because I lie there and take it? I'm queer and you're not?"

Matt stayed silent. Had he actually meant that? Was there no end to the hurt he

was willing to perpetrate on James?

"Well?" James pushed Matt back so he bumped the sink. "I'm not man enough for you, Matt? I'm a fucking faggot who should wear pink and walk with a limp wrist, is that it? All because I let you fuck me?"

Matt lowered his gaze. He stepped around James, retrieved his clothes and headed for the bedroom. But James hadn't finished.

"You hate me because I let you fuck me, isn't that right? You think I'm disgusting for letting you do it."

Matt threw his towel on the bed. He pulled on his boxers and his jeans over damp skin.

"Say it!" James cried, pulling him around by the arm. "Fucking say what you think about me, I want to hear 324

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the truth."

"Yeah," Matt said, staring down into those aquamarine eyes. "I hate you. Look what you've done to me."

"What *I've* done to you?" James let go of him. "I did my best for you. I nursed you back to health and I compromised my licence because Jesus, I wanted you so much, and you used me and hurt me and still I let you come back to use me again. And I don't know why, I really don't, other than..." He stopped, choking on sobs. "Get out. Get out of my fucking house and don't come back."

Matt grabbed his shoes and socks and charged past him. He barely saw where he was going for the red mist in front of him.

His shirt lay downstairs on the hall floor, and his cell was in the kitchen. He unintentionally kicked the cat as he went into the room in the dark and cursed the feline loudly as it scampered up the stairs yowling. He retrieved his cell and came back out into the hall, picking up his shirt and pulling it on, fastening the

buttons.

"Did you kick my cat?" A cold, furious voice sounded from the top of the stairs.

"No. He ran into my foot."

"You fucking bastard." James came charging down the stairs still wrapped in his towel, his face scarlet with 325

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fury. As Matt stepped back, James swung his fist at him.

Matt fell back against the front door, tasting blood.

"You want to kick someone, you kick *me*! Don't take it out on my fucking cat!" James screamed at him.

Matt shoved James backwards hard and was surprised when James hit him again, catching him a blow above his eye. He felt the skin split open, and he was blinded with blood for a moment. He lunged at James, knocking him to the floor and drove his fist into his side, feeling the unmistakable give of ribs breaking as he did.

James gasped in pain, but didn't give up struggling beneath him until Matt grabbed his wrists and pinned his arms above his head. "Stop, just stop. I'm not going to fight with you anymore."

He looked down into James' wild face, and he saw the same thing he had just told James he felt. *Hatred*.

He let go of James abruptly and climbed to his feet, then retrieved his fallen cell and put it in his pocket. He glanced up the stairs and saw Sooty there watching him unblinkingly.

His gaze moved towards James who climbed to his feet, a red mark on his side beginning to darken into a bruise.

"We're done," Matt said in a low voice. "Never call me again. Have you got that?"

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Wordlessly, James nodded.

Matt held eye contact for a brief moment more, before he opened the door and slipped through it.

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## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Matt cleaned up his face as best he could and rummaged through the medical supplies still lying in his spare room. After using some paper strips to close the cut above his eye, he crawled into bed. He remembered he had yet to change the sheets, and moved to the side James had recently slept on. The pillow smelled of the sweet, citrus scent of his hair. A feeling choked him so hard he could barely breathe. What had he done?

He had carried James upstairs, and they had laughed and joked like two lovers. The sex had been out of this world. It had been perfect and right and he had been on track to spend another night in his lover's arms, and then, what had happened?

Why didn't he let it go? Why didn't he say sorry?

Why had the fight escalated into such needless violence?

What did it matter what James had done to him, and why was Matt so against being pleased by his lover?

He couldn't blame James for his anger at Matt kicking Sooty, even if it had been an accident, but oh God, that punch in the ribs he had given James. The pain on his face. And he had walked out after doing that; actually walked out, instead of begging James' forgiveness on his goddamned knees.

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He reached for his cell from the bedside table, looked at it a moment, then put it back. This was going to kill him, and he deserved it.

He woke to Severine tapping softly on the door. His body ached as he rolled over and called for her to come in.

She entered the room, bringing his breakfast tray, and went to draw the curtains.

Matt had forgotten he had told Nick he was taking the morning off, but now saw no reason to do it, now that he wasn't waking up next to James. The pang of regret which knifed through him made his chest ache with misery.

"Matthew," she said softly with a gasp as she turned around and the autumn sun fell on him. "Your face. *Again*."

Tell me James didn't do that to you."

The only thing Matt knew that morning was he had deserved everything he got off James and more.

"No," he told Severine. "It was an accident."

She made no comment. Instead she remarked. "You look so tired, Matthew. Why don't you take some time off work and rest? You seem to be under the most terrible strain."

Strain was what it was all right. The strain of holding himself up under the weight of these feelings which threatened to smother him. "I was going to go in  
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late," he murmured. "I might still do that."

"Have your breakfast and then go back to sleep,"

Severine suggested.

Matt nodded. As she left the room, he lay back down, but his mind whirled, and instead he got up and went down the landing to his office. After turning on the computer, he found the right website in a few minutes. He entered his credit card details and purchased a basket filled with various treats and toys. To be written on the card accompanying the gift he typed, *To Sooty, I'm sorry*.

He went back to his room and got back under the covers.

He had finally fallen asleep a couple of hours later when his phone beeped with a text message and he snatched it up, his heart almost soaring with elation when he saw James' name.

A moment later, his heart was trampled firmly into the dirt.

*Sooty told me to tell you to fuck off. He's not for sale.*

\* \* \* \*

Matt spent the rest of the week shut up alone at 330

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home when he wasn't at work. Lewis called, and Matt told him perfunctorily that he and James were history, and he didn't want to discuss it. He lay sleepless in bed, his cell on the bedside table, watching it silently, willing it to ring, even after he'd told James never to call him again. He asked himself repeatedly , *what have I done? How can I carry on without him?*

\* \* \* \*

James took two days off work. He spent it lying in bed with Sooty curled up with him. He was disgusted with himself at being so quick to violence. He wasn't even sure if Matt *had* kicked Sooty deliberately. A man with anger management issues like Matt responded better to soft words rather than screams of anger, which merely incited him to fight. Soft words and an apology about what he had tried to do in the shower might have seen Matt in his bed within a few minutes, but instead, James had given Matt the excuse to hit him by throwing the first punch, just like last time.

For a normally placid man, Matt seemed to be winding James up into a fury way too many times these days, and he hated the way he found himself behaving. This violent man wasn't James. Why hadn't he mollified Matt's straight ego after the shower incident? He knew Matt was easy to 331

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manipulate in the heat of the moment and that in time, James could probably have bent him to his wishes in bed.

Why let it all get so out of control? Now Matt was gone, and James wasn't sure how to go about picking up the pieces of his broken heart. He buried his face into the pillow as every breath he took hurt him.

\* \* \* \*

On Friday night Matt was forced by a previous commitment to leave the house. He had already agreed some months ago to attend a charity book auction in aid of the local animal rescue shelter. Matt had always donated a percentage of his profits to charity, and the new centre had caught his eye as being something really good when it had first opened last year. It was Nick who reminded him of his agreement, even though Matt wanted nothing but to curl up in bed that night after this most horrendous of weeks. He had attended a clinic the previous day to get the staples removed from his head, and his scalp had felt odd and bare as he had washed his hair, without its reminder of James.

He tiredly showered and put on a suit and tie, aware of the rival sellers he would be mixing with and the opportunities such an evening could present. His face in the mirror showed him haunted green eyes and chalky white 332

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skin. He needed to go away. Maybe he'd disappear to the Caribbean for a few weeks and fuck his way around an island.

Nick had Lewis in tow as his guest, both of them dressed to kill and glowing with life. "Come on, man,"

Lewis said softly when they reached the hotel. He put his arm around Matt's shoulders and led him to the bar. "What are you having?"

Matt didn't flinch the way he used to do when his friend touched him, because James had taught him a lesson about human touch he would never forget. He

murmured his order for a Jack and Coke, and then he looked around with disinterest, spotting business associates and nodding politely at them. He checked out a few women, but found his eye wandering to the men, comparing everyone to James and finding them wanting.

Nick and Lewis steered him to his seat in the packed auditorium, and the auction began in earnest. The quality of some of the books coming up surprised Matt.

Many were rare, out of print items or first editions that would usually have his mouth watering with the need to add them to his own personal collection or sell them on his website for a much greater sum.

Tonight he was too distracted and distraught with misery. At least until a first edition of *Wuthering Heights* 333

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appeared, handled by the auctioneer with white gloves. The man held it up to the audience with the love and attention it deserved, and Matt—who would deny being a closet romantic, but why else would this book have a special place in his heart?—had to own it.

He made the first bid at five hundred dollars. A woman in the front row raised the stakes to a thousand.

Matt continued to bid with her. When they got up to five thousand, a male voice spoke to the right, behind him. "Six thousand."

Matt, confident the woman would drop out soon and startled at this new bidder, turned his head, the back of his neck prickling as he recognised the voice.

He knew the face of the man with his hand in the air, blond and quietly confident, the man he'd punched in the bar a few weeks ago — Michael. Matt's stomach lurched because where there was Michael there was...

His gaze moved to the next chair and confirmed his worst fears. Done up severely in a black suit with a purple tie and lolling drunkenly in his chair laughing, sat James.

Matt stared. James almost spilled to the floor. Matt had never seen him drunk, and it shocked him to find out how James' composure and air of serenity disappeared when under the influence. He turned away quickly. He felt oddly disappointed with James, and had now missed his 334

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turn in the bidding, the woman in front getting a seven thousand bid in.

"Eight," he said quickly and turned around to look at Michael.

Both Michael and James were looking right at him now. Michael smirked coolly, lifted his hand and said,

"Nine."

Matt's gaze held James'. James watched him with something resembling arrogant amusement which made Matt's blood begin to boil. Lewis put a calming hand on his arm as he turned around to face the auctioneer.

"Ten," he said, sitting back in his chair with arms folded, confident he had outbid Michael.

The voice which haunted his dreams spoke behind him. "Fifteen thousand dollars."

There were muted whispers around the auditorium, and the auctioneer banged his gavel.

"Fifteen thousand dollars from the gentleman with the purple tie."

Matt whirled around, eyes narrowed on James, and was greeted with a smug, all-knowing smile. Beside him, Michael berated James furiously in an undertone, but James didn't listen, preferring to watch Matt get himself into a lather. What was the man playing at? Obviously Michael didn't want him to place that bid, and there was no way 335

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James could afford the book himself so... what? Was he expecting Matt to outbid him and pay a ridiculous amount of money for the book? He clenched his fist, ignoring Lewis and Nick; who were murmuring confusedly by his side. No, he would turn the tables. Two could play at this game. James was about to find himself in a whole heap of trouble. He gave James a cold smile and turned back to face the auctioneer.

"Do I hear sixteen?" the man asked, looking at Matt, who shook his head almost imperceptibly.

"Fifteen thousand dollars, ladies and gentlemen, any other bids? Going once, going twice..."

Matt's heart was in his mouth at what he was about to do. James would probably be bankrupted by this book, but the way he saw it, he deserved it for trying to play this sort of game with Matt when Matt suffered enough over the ending of their affair.

"Sold to the gentleman in black for fifteen thousand dollars."

"Jesus Christ," Lewis muttered beside Matt.

Matt turned around to look at James, expecting him to be crying into his drink at the prospect of coughing up fifteen thousand dollars, but on the contrary, he smirked at Matt and lifted his glass in a toast, while Michael threw some sort of fit beside him.

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Matt lost the plot, as he usually did where James was concerned. He launched himself from his chair and stalked down to the end of the row and into the next aisle.

There he gripped James unceremoniously from his seat and dragged him to his

feet, shoving Michael away as he tried to interfere.

Marching James from the room was an easy task, because his body felt like a bundle of limp jelly in Matt's grasp. He fell over his feet and laughed to himself, unconcerned at being handled this way.

Matt's gaze darted around the lobby. Off towards the elevators stood a long, narrow corridor which turned away out of view. He dragged James by the arm down it, opened a door and shoved him inside, then closed it behind them. The room was pitch black, lit only by moonlight; a kind of storage room with tables lined neatly and chairs stacked up.

James gave a grunt of annoyance and tried to step past Matt to get out. Matt gripped him by the lapels of his jacket and rammed him into the wall. "What the fuck are you doing?"

James gave a high-pitched laugh. "Buying a book."

"You can't afford it," Matt said scornfully. "I'm really going to laugh at you trying to worm your way out of this one."

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"Oh I don't know," James replied, his hands gripping Matt's biceps hard. "I could sell you my ass to raise the money. I'm worth fifteen grand to you, aren't I?"

Matt looked at him in disgust. "I wouldn't take you for free if you were giving it away on a street corner," he sneered, the biggest lie he had ever told in his life.

The expression changed on James' face; the drunken merriment fled. Lit by silver moonlight, his thick lashes cast heavy shadows beneath his eyes, and those beautiful eyes gleamed unmistakably so the heaviness of regret began to instantly pool in Matt's stomach.

James' hands tightened on his arms. Their faces were so close Matt felt James' breath on him, smelled the whiskey fumes. "You've wanted me since the moment



I came to work for you," he said in a low, slurred voice, his eyes fixed unblinkingly on Matt.

"No," Matt said quickly.

"Yes. You jerked off over me in your bathroom while I stood outside."

Matt's hands let go of his jacket. They fell heavily onto James' shoulders, and his fingers gripped them hard.

"No," he said again. "I wanted a break from women. You were it. A tight ass which got me off. A dirty little experiment. Nothing else."

"You're a liar."

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"No I'm not. You're nothing to me. You'll never be anything to me, try as you will to make it that way."

Matt saw in that moment that he'd finally succeeded in unravelling him. James' face crumpled, his eyes swam and his mouth trembled. His legs seemed to buckle so Matt had to move even closer to hold him up against the wall.

James started to cry. Not with great sobs, but with stifled gasps for air which made his whole body shudder against Matt's. Matt didn't know what to do, only that this image broke him the way nothing ever had in his life. He could have turned and walked away now, satisfied he had done a good job and James wouldn't be bothering him again, but he couldn't do that now if his life depended on it.

His hands moved to each side of James' neck, and he stroked it a moment in silence as though this would work. It didn't. James, still with virtually no sound, continued to weep. Matt moved one hand behind his head, cradling it, while the other found James' cheek, his thumb stroking rivers of tears away.

James tried to push him away with no real strength behind it. Only knowing one way to provide comfort, Matt leaned down and brushed his lips over his.

James gasped and Matt tasted the salt of his tears.

His hand curled firmly around James' neck, holding him in place as he tried to resist. After a matter of moments, 339

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James' mouth opened up to his, and his hands clutched at Matt's shirt with an almost desperate grip.

Matt felt the fire consume him. His hand moved up the back of James' jacket and shirt as he kissed him, tracing the smooth curve of his spine, holding him close with a touch so reverent he surprised himself. James pushed Matt's jacket off. He pulled his tie open and unfastened the buttons on Matt's shirt with trembling fingers, then pushed it from his shoulders and traced the muscles of his biceps and pectorals until Matt was convinced his skin would blaze with flames at his touch.

He drew James' jacket from his shoulders, dropped it, and loosened his tie so he could unfasten his shirt and touch the skin beneath. He saw it instantly, the dark bruise on James' side that he himself had inflicted, and he became choked. He crouched down and bent his head. He traced it with his fingers and dropped light kisses over it as James shuddered.

He straightened, moved James away from the wall and manoeuvred him towards a table, hands fumbling his pants open. He pulled them and his boxers down and turned him around. James bent willingly over the table, his arms shaking. He moaned a little as Matt stroked his bare backside with one gentle hand.

He was far too desperate to prepare James properly, 340

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but at least he had a condom in his wallet this time. He rolled it on and penetrated his lover slowly. Shadows and silver moonlight dappled James' pale skin. His breath hitched in his throat as Matt reached around to take him in hand, stroking James while he sought to hit that place James had once shown him.

James arched up off the table with a cry of Matt's name. He panted for breath, moving back against Matt, every undulation of his delicious body sensual and seductive. Matt pulled him upright by the shoulder. He kissed James as his lover turned his head to meet him, and they moved together with almost simultaneous moans with every thrust.

James' hand clamped around Matt's so they both jerked him off. He writhed against Matt's torso, begging for more in a hoarse, broken voice.

Matt ground out James' name. He spilled himself, eyes closed, and he was rewarded with James following directly and a cried confession.

"Matt, oh God Matt, I love you."

James went almost boneless in Matt's arms, so it was only Matt's body that held him up. Matt held tight to him, heart hammering, face pressed against James' neck.

Oh God, had he heard right? James tried to move away, but Matt held him firmer, not wanting to let him go. Not now.

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Before he knew it, his face curved into a helpless smile.

He pressed a few kisses to James' shoulders and neck before he let him go and stepped back to dress. As he fastened his tie, a voice stopped him.

"I'm going to New York."

"What?"

"I'm not coming back. David's got me a job out there."

Matt frowned. That troublesome heart of his now had a mortal wound to it and slowly exsanguinated into his chest. "But... you said..."

"I know. And I meant it. But I'm going. I can't bear to do this anymore. I can't let you put me through anything else."

"But..." Matt trailed off hopelessly. He watched as James smoothed down his shirt and tidied his hair a little.

Matt gripped his arm. "Listen to me. All that shit I said, those times I hurt you..."

James waited, gaze fixed on his, but Matt couldn't speak. James was going, despite what he had just confessed, which meant nothing Matt could do could make him stay now.

He let go of his arm while inside he howled. James leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his lips. Matt, hurting and broken, savagely pushed him away. James stumbled 342

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back. He turned and fled from the room before Matt could think about dragging him back in regret.

Matt was left in the dark room which smelled of sex. He slid to the floor, sitting with his back to the wall and stewed in despair at what he had just lost.

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## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Matt wasn't sure how he got through the next day.

He switched his cell off and refused to answer the home phone. He sent Severine home after breakfast, fielding her questions on why he looked so ghastly, then he wandered around his huge, empty house all day like a lost soul until he thought he would start screaming with grief.

Even if he did the right thing now, told James he wanted him, he wouldn't stay. Why confess his love for him when he was going? How could he be so cruel? He burned with anger at both James and himself and everything that had happened between them. But he knew deep down he deserved James' cruelty. He deserved everything he got.

He got James off the hook with the owner of the book. The man selling the copy of *Wuthering Heights* was a business associate of Matt's who was confused when Matt called him and explained he would be writing a personal cheque for the book. "But I've got the buyer down here as a James Hayden."

"Yes, it was... a mistake on his part. He was drunk.

Send it to me."

\* \* \* \*

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On Sunday afternoon, he answered a call from Lewis. "He's leaving today."

Matt's heart seemed to shudder to a halt in his chest.

"I see."

"His flight's at eight. You've got time."

"To do what?"

"Don't fuck about, Matt. You've fucked this up a hundred times already. Do the right thing and stop him from going to New York."

"Not going to happen, Lewis."

"I repeat. His flight leaves at eight. Don't make the worst fucking mistake of your life." Lewis hung up.

Matt put his cell down and glanced at his watch.

Four-thirty. He went down to his gym in the basement and gave himself the most punishing work-out he could muster.

Face-down on the work-bench after an hour, he found himself trembling so violently that he could not move. His chest ached so badly that he became convinced he was having a heart-attack. He laid his cheek against the leather with his eyes closed and took some deep breaths, willing away the feelings which rose to suffocate him.

After a few minutes, he began to ask himself why he still bothered to work out, now James was going. James was the only one who understood, the only one who could

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bear to look at Matt naked. The only one who had touched and kissed his scars as though they were something to be worshipped and not reviled. Matt couldn't imagine wanting to undress in front of another human being ever again.

He got up and left the gym. Upstairs, he took a hot shower and got dressed. He drank a glass of cranberry juice down in the kitchen while watching the first leaves of autumn fall from the trees in his garden. He sat there until six-thirty. Then he took his car keys and went out to the garage. The seat and pedals of his BMW felt unfamiliar.

The big car started easily despite its months of disuse, and Matt slowly eased it out of the garage. He crawled down the drive in it, clammy hands clenching the wheel, foot resting shyly on the accelerator, letting the slope of the ground carry the vehicle. He got to the gates to his property and stopped, looking down the road, indicating to turn right. Instead of pulling out into the empty road, Matt put on the parking brake and sat there a moment with the engine idling.

One of his favourite albums played on the stereo; a local band who had been going many years and were just starting to make it big. He closed his eyes and let the music soothe him. Instead of relaxing, he remembered being pinned in his Lamborghini and begging for someone to take the pain away. He remembered begging James for the same 346

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thing when he had come to work for him. And he realised that all along, maybe for his entire lonely life, he had been waiting for someone to rescue him. And James had done that.

He opened his eyes and looked out into the road again. Finding it still empty, he guided the car out.

As soon as he pulled onto the freeway, he hit the scene of an accident and crawled for miles in traffic with no way to pull off or turn around. He glanced constantly at his watch, swearing and hitting the steering wheel as the time ticked inexorably past seven-thirty.

When he reached the airport, his hands were so stiff on the steering wheel that it hurt to unclench them. It was past eight and his heart sank, knowing he was too late.

Recklessly, he left his car in a no waiting zone and ran into the airport. The screen told him all he needed to know, that the next flight to New York was boarding. Not quite defeated, he ran to the desk and asked for a ticket to New York, not even blinking when it cost him one thousand five hundred dollars. The woman issued the ticket, but explained boarding had started and would not be halted for him. He ignored her and her requests for baggage and charged through security, explaining breathlessly when he was pulled up by suspicious airport

personnel that he had to see someone on the flight, that he had no intentions of  
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flying to New York.

The two men who had stopped him didn't like this at all. They asked where his hand luggage was. Matt repeated that he had none, because he didn't intend to fly.

"So you bought a ticket just to talk to someone?"

"Yes." Matt's eyes flickered desperately to the overhead screen which said the plane was still boarding.

"Please, let me go."

The two men looked at each other and one shook his head. "What's your name?"

"Matthew Harmon."

"Do you have any identification?"

"Yes." Matt pulled his wallet from his back pocket and opened it, showing his driver's licence. "Please, just..."

"Come with me please, Mr. Harmon." He took Matt by the arm.

"No," Matt protested, shrugging free. "I need to..."

The man caught his arm more firmly this time and Matt yanked it free and started to run. He was rugby tackled to the ground within a few moments, his hands cuffed behind his back.

\* \* \* \*

Matt was sitting silently, staring at the clock on the 348



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wall when Lewis and Nick came to bail him out. He didn't say anything until they had paid his bail and he sat in the back of Lewis' car in the traffic going home, his car locked up in the pound until the morning.

"Stop at an ATM, I'll get you the cash."

"Later. Let's get you home," Lewis said.

Nick turned around to look at him. "What the fuck were you doing?" he asked, almost in amusement, his face turning regretful when he saw the utter anguish on Matt's.

"I don't know what I was doing," Matt said quietly, turning his face to the window. "I made a big mistake."

At home he refused to let Nick and Lewis in and went into his kitchen alone, sitting there nursing a bottle of bourbon for the longest time.

\* \* \* \*

He awoke late on Monday morning with a hangover. Groaning when he saw the time, he reached over for his cell and called Nick at work. "I'm sorry. Give me an hour."

"Why don't you take the day off?" Nick said softly.

"I've got everything under control here."

"Okay," Matt said reluctantly. "I'll see you tomorrow." He hung up. Nick probably thought he was 349

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having a nervous breakdown. And why hadn't Severine woke him up before now?

After ten minutes a knock came at the door. He called for his housekeeper to come in, but to his surprise, it was Lewis.

His friend came over and perched on his bed.

"Severine told me she let you sleep this morning because you were up 'til all hours last night."

Matt said nothing, sliding into a sitting position.

"Here."

Matt took the proffered piece of paper, unfolding it and reading. "What's this?"

"The name of the hospital James is working at."

Matt reddened a little, averting his eyes. "I don't..."

"Yes, you do. You got arrested yesterday trying to stop him from leaving. Now go online and get yourself a ticket to New York."

Matt didn't reply, staring at the paper.

Lewis put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "I'll call you later," he said as he got up and left the room.

Matt got up after a few minutes and went into his office. When Severine tapped timidly on the door and put her head around it, he muttered, "Hmm?" distractedly from the computer.

"Are you okay?"

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"I'm fine."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to New York. Tomorrow morning."

"I see. Shall I pack you a bag?"

"No. I can do it."

"Okay. Do you want breakfast?"

"Yes, please."

"Right. And Matthew?"

"What?"

"I'm so glad you're going after James." The door clicked shut softly and Matt glared at it. Lewis had a big mouth. Severine hadn't known at all until this morning that James had gone to New York.

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## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Matt loitered on the streets of New York for some time after checking into his hotel. When he found the hospital, his nerves failed him. He had no speech prepared, no grand gestures to make other than the feelings in his heart begging to be heard and the ache which tormented him at every moment of the day.

He turned around and went into a drug store where he bought a herbal remedy for anxiety. He took himself off to a Starbucks and washed the tablets down with a latte, then sat nursing it for an endless amount of time, waiting for calmness to descend on him before finally realising that it wasn't going to. He left the coffee shop and put some gum in his mouth to freshen his breath.

Making it back to the hospital, he discarded his gum into a trash can because he'd chewed it so fiercely his jaw ached. He passed through the automatic doors to the emergency room and wandered past the reception desk and into the main area, where he approached a pretty woman in pink scrubs as she walked past.

"Excuse me," he said, turning on the charm so her eyes widened with interest when they fell on him, and she flushed a little, gaze perusing his scar momentarily, but not seeming put off. "I'm looking for James Hayden."

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"He's just up there," she pointed with a smile, and Matt's eyes fell on a figure in blue scrubs bending over a patient in a cubicle, the curtain open. His heart clenched hard and then started to thud painfully against his ribs.

"Thank you," he murmured, knowing the woman glanced back at him as she walked away. A year ago he would have loved this attention and looked back at her too, but that was before he had nearly died and been saved by an angel. Now he was single-minded and focused. He wanted only one thing from life.

He approached the cubicle with damp hands and trembling legs. A woman lay on

the bed with a spotlight on her face. James stood over her, suturing a wound above her eye, his back to Matt.

Matt shifted direction so he approached from James'

side and he could catch sight of him in his peripheral vision. For a moment he watched James' skilful hands, fascinated as he threaded the wickedly-curved needle through the skin, caught the end of the thread with his holder and wrapped the thread around it, tied a knot and repeated this action until the knot was firm. Then he snipped the stitch with scissors, reached for a gauze swab and dabbed some blood away which bubbled from the wound. "Are you okay?" he asked in a murmur, leaning over the patient.

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Matt didn't hear the patient's reply because he was too busy thinking about how wonderful this man was.

James' head turned abruptly to his and he froze at his task.

Which made two of them; because Matt could barely breathe as he looked upon the face he had spent three days missing like a part of him had gone.

James seemed to blink and recover himself only when the patient turned her head to look at Matt. He put his instruments down carefully and slowly on the trolley next to him and snapped his gloves off. "I'll be back," he told his patient before stepping towards Matt, his face ghastly pale, his eyes suspicious and hurt. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to you," Matt said urgently, his eyes focused on James, not caring that they were standing here in public, surrounded by patients and staff. He watched the battle of emotions on James' face. He prepared for James to say that he did not want to listen to anything Matt had to say. He prepared himself to fight for what he wanted, the way he never had in his life before.

Instead, James said, "Where are you staying?"

"The Waldorf," Matt said, hardly daring to hope, his heart beating hard.

"What room?"

"Three twenty."

James nodded shortly. "I'll be there some time after 354

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seven-thirty."

Matt nodded. Inside a voice screamed that seven-thirty was a lifetime away, that he couldn't wait that long before he had James in his arms.

Before he could say anything else, James turned away abruptly. He moved back to his patient's cubicle and yanked the curtain closed behind him.

Matt turned and walked away, his brain boiling with turmoil, not sure if James' willingness to come to his hotel was a positive sign or not. Certainly his manner had been less than friendly. It had been that professional, distant manner he had known when James nursed him. But he now knew what feelings had lurked behind that distant manner.

James had been a ball of desire and longing, just the same as Matt.

He set off down the street in the direction of his hotel. As he wandered aimlessly, a shop window caught his eye.

He stopped and stared at the display inside and the emotions it was supposed to symbolise. Then he went inside and spent a ridiculous amount of money on something he thought he would never buy in his life.

\* \* \* \*

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James' hands weren't steady enough to suture anymore. He exited the cubicle again and asked a colleague to take over, then he went to the bathroom and splashed some cold water on his face and stared at his reflection in the mirror. Never in a million years had he expected Matt to turn up here. And only two days after James had arrived, too. Of course he'd longed for it in his darkest, most misguided fantasies, but never had he expected it to happen. And what else could Matt be here for other than to beg James to return? But what would he be offering? A resumption of their fuck buddy relationship? Their twisted, violent, sick little relationship.

James went into a stall, put the lid of the toilet down and slumped onto it. No, he could only give Matt one answer, and that answer had to be no. He couldn't be allowed to have another chance, because next time he would finish James off completely.

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# Chapter Thirty

Matt haunted the streets of New York with disinterest until six-thirty, buying presents for his friends and his housekeeper like he was on some kind of goddamn holiday when in fact he was on the most important mission he had ever undertaken in his whole life. He returned to his hotel, showered and shaved and then sat on a chair in the living room area of his suite, staring unseeingly at the TV

with glazed eyes and wet palms.

He trembled all over as the clock on the wall hit seven forty-five. James was going to tell him to fuck off out of his life for good. Maybe he wouldn't even turn up, which would be his ultimate revenge.

His eyes flew to the door at a firm rap. *This is it, oh Jesus, this is it.* He stood up and started to pace the floor, running a hand through his carefully gelled back hair, not making for the door but traversing the same spot of carpet several times near his seat.

The knock came again.

Shit, James was going to give up. Matt bolted for the door, but stopped to take some deep breaths before fumbling it open.

James looked breathtaking. He wore a black T-shirt with a red design which moulded to his perfect body and 357

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showed his well-toned biceps. His jeans were tight, the belt on them full of wicked spikes, just like his hair, glossy and black.

Matt stepped backwards mutely, holding the door open, almost expecting James to spit out what he had to say right there in the doorway, telling Matt he never wanted to see him again. But he didn't. Instead he stepped into the spider's lair



and walked across the living room to the window to look at the dizzying view of New York below.

Matt closed the door carefully and leaned on it a moment, studying James' body.

"Well?" James turned around.

Matt moved across to the mini-bar. "Do you want a drink?"

James shook his head. "Say what you've got to say.

I've some place to be."

The ice in his tone caused Matt's heart to sink to the ground. He stood with his head bowed a moment, trying and failing to conjure up any words at all.

"Come on," James said impatiently, so Matt couldn't help but look up with aggrieved eyes, drowning in all the sorrow of his own making.

Silence reigned. Abruptly, James strode back towards the door. "I'm not standing here all night while you find your fucking tongue. I'm done with you."

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Matt almost flew across the room as James went to open the door, catching hold of his arm hard. "Please," he said urgently. "Please just... listen to me."

James, held close by Matt's grip, stared up into his eyes. "Say it," he said in a low voice.

Matt fumbled for the right words once more, knowing this time was his last chance. "If you..." he burst out, stammering. "If you... *wanted* me, you could... *have* me. For the rest of my life. Not that shit we pretended at before. I mean for real. *All* of me."

James' mouth opened a little, a flush of colour rising on his cheeks, his eyes wide. Matt's hand tightened on his arm, and he drew James closer so their bodies

were pressed together. "I know what I've done, and I know how I've hurt you, but I would do anything you wanted to make that happen. Anything at all. And I got you this, to show you I mean it."

He fumbled the box out of his pocket and opened it, showing its contents to James. On black velvet nestled a platinum and diamond band. James just stared, his eyes liquid, huge with disbelief. Matt took the ring out with trembling hands and held it so James could read the inscription on the inside in the tiniest writing.

*My heart belongs to you*

James drew in his breath. Matt took his hand and 359

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slid the ring onto his third finger, shocked when it fit.

James stared up into his eyes with a look which made Matt tremble with barely concealed hope. Then he shook his head abruptly. "No. That's not good enough."

Matt almost gaped at him, his heart broken and bleeding once more, just as he thought James had been applying the sticking plaster to it. "What?"

"I need more from you than you throwing your money around like always. I need you to tell me how you feel about me."

"Oh, you know," Matt said fearfully. "You've always known."

"No I don't," James said dismissively. "This ring means nothing if you don't say it."

Matt sighed. He put an arm around James' waist and cupped his cheek with his other hand, leaning close to him so their noses almost touched. "I'm afraid that if I say this, you'll throw it back in my face," he said softly in anguish.

"That's the chance you'll have to take." James' voice was still hard, but his eyes, welling with tears, spoke a different language. "I know you've never taken a chance on anything in your life, Matt, and it's time you did."

Matt bowed his head, eyes closed, biting his lip and fighting for composure. James' fingers touched his face, tracing the line of his jaw gently, moving over his lips with 360

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a touch like a butterfly's wings. He pursed his lips against them, and raised his hand up to take James'. He dropped a kiss into his palm, then pressed it back to his face and held it there.

With his eyes still closed, Matt murmured, "I love you."

In the silence which followed, he opened his eyes.

"You're beautiful, you're funny, you're smart and I adore you. I want you forever. If you were mine, I would treat you like a goddamn prince. I would worship the ground you walk on. I would do anything for you, *anything*. I've wanted you since the first moment I set eyes on you, you had that right. I never met anyone like you before in my life and I *never* wanted a guy before.

"Nearly dying was the greatest thing that ever happened to me, when I always thought it was the worst.

Because if I hadn't crashed my car I never would have met you. And I'm sorry for all the pain I've caused you; you have no idea how sorry I am. If you'll let me, I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you, I swear to God."

He stopped, all out of words, cheeks flaming just as James' right arm slid around his neck and he murmured Matt's name softly as he pressed his lips to his.

James stole all the breath from his lungs and drew him down into oblivion. It was possibly the most tender 361

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kiss they had ever shared, a meeting of mouths that went so far beyond the

physical Matt could have sworn he felt their souls fuse together in that moment. They kissed and kissed until everything became hazy as tongues tangled and hands sought skin, moving in a blissful dance towards the bedroom, shedding clothes and kicking off shoes.

They made love lying on their sides, Matt behind James, curled together as one. The movements Matt made into his lover were slow and languorous, the kisses he placed on the back of his neck tender. James moaned softly, rocking back against him, perfectly in time with Matt's rhythm, his head turning to seek Matt's mouth constantly.

Matt wasn't sure afterwards how he lasted so long, but he did. The lovemaking seemed to go on forever; no urgency to it, kisses and touches and breathy moans exchanged until James came, his head back against Matt's shoulder, his body shuddering and writhing and wringing Matt's climax instantly from him, his mouth against the hot, damp skin of his lover's throat.

Some moments later, Matt finally lifted his face from where it was buried, planted a few lingering kisses and then eased himself free, moving onto his back and discarding his condom.

When he turned his head, James looked wary.

"What?" Matt asked gently, sweeping his hand over James'

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brow to massage away the lines his forehead had settled into.

"I'm waiting for you to regain your senses now you've come," James explained quietly.

"Come on..."

"Aren't you going to throw me out?"

Matt gave a sigh. "Shit, this *is* me regaining my senses, like I should have done months ago." A hand caressed James' back softly, tracing the perfect curve of his spine. "I meant everything I said. I want you. Being without you will kill me."

He drew James into his arms. Holding his head against his shoulder, he stroked his hair with the most loving touch as he closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

When Matt awoke, the curtains were closed and the bedside lamp illuminated the room softly. He opened his eyes to see James lying by his side, watching him silently, a slow smile spreading across his face as Matt awoke.

"Hey."

Matt leaned close, pressing a kiss to his lips. "Hey you." He was thirsty, and his head ached. "What time is it?"

"Ten."

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"Want to go out to dinner?"

James smiled gently and shook his head. "Not tonight. I want to stay naked all night."

Matt's blood heated to volcanic proportions. "If you insist." He drew James into a heated kiss.

"We could have room service if you like," James said when Matt finally released him. "Some champagne?"

His smile was almost shy.

Matt returned it, the smile alien on his face.

James pressed the palm of his hand to Matt's scarred cheek, then his fingertips traced his lips. "You smiled," he whispered. "Let me kiss your smile."

Matt's eyes slipped shut in rapture, the smile still on his face as James kissed him.

"You're beautiful," James whispered. Matt's lashes lifted, and he stared at him, blood rising to his face, his chest tight. He tried to shake his head, but James caught his face in both hands and nodded. "You *are*," he said earnestly. "You were beautiful when you were laid up in that bed, and you're beautiful now. The moment I saw you, I fell in love with you."

Matt tried to speak but couldn't for the lump in his throat.

"I understand body image issues, Matt." James stroked Matt's scar gently. "I've seen it all a thousand times 364

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before, and none of it is ugly to me. And you least of all.

You're perfect. Absolutely perfect. I adore every inch of you."

Matt remained looking into James' eyes until his own were so filled with tears that he couldn't see straight.

Then he closed them as the first drops came trickling down his cheeks.

James crushed Matt hard to him, face against his chest, one hand stroking his hair. "Let it out," he said in a fierce whisper. "You have no idea how long I've waited."

And those words gave Matt the permission he had denied himself since he had almost died. Since he had found himself bedbound and scarred and falling in love with his nurse. Since he had denied himself what he'd always wanted, just because he was afraid.

A sob tore from his throat, and he held hard to James as he started to weep. Once

he began he couldn't stop. He cried and cried, stammering out finally those feelings he had kept inside while he had lain in that hospital bed alone. Those feelings about his scarred body, his near death, his desire for James and the way he had never been loved in his life.

And James was there, as he had been in Matt's darkest hour. He held Matt and told him it was okay. Told him he would never be alone again, and there was nothing 365

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for Matt to be afraid of now with James by his side.

Matt cried himself into exhaustion, and finally lay still in James' arms. Neither spoke for the longest while, but James lifted Matt's head from his chest and looked into his eyes. He smiled gently, stroking his face dry, kissing the tracks of his tears before attaching his lips to Matt's and taking all his pain away for good.

\* \* \* \*

Neither wanted dinner by the time James rang room service and asked for their best champagne. The bedroom door was open, and Matt knew the room service boy could see him lying in the bed when James, wearing a robe, let him in. Anxiety speared him for a moment, and he debated for a split-second pulling the covers up over his head and hiding. Then he remembered he had declared his love for James, and he intended for this man to be with him for the rest of his life. That meant letting people know they were together and being proud of the fact. So he lay in bed and smiled at the boy as he glanced into the room before James tipped him and closed the door.

He slid from the bed and pulled on a robe, then made his way to the living room to find James with the bottle in his hand, twisting the cork. Champagne erupted all 366

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over the carpet, to a curse of dismay from James and a cackle of laughter from Matt. James hurriedly filled two glasses, then put the bottle down and wiped his wet hand on a napkin, glowering at Matt's amusement.

"Mental note," Matt said, "the first thing I need to teach you is how to open a bottle of champagne properly, and then how to clean my house so I can let Severine go."

He smirked.

"The first thing I need to teach *you*," James shot back immediately, "is how to lie on your back beneath me."

After a startled pause of silence, Matt laughed and pulled James into his arms, devouring his mouth. "Touché,"

he said against his lips.

James lifted his glass. "To us."

"To us."

Later, when they were back in bed, James idly flicking TV channels while Matt lay with his head on his chest, he asked, "Are you coming home?" He almost dreaded the answer. He didn't want to have to commute to New York.

James looked down at him. "Do you want me to?"

"I don't care. If you wanted to stay here, I would come and live here. I don't care where I have to live to be with you."

James smiled. "I'll come home."

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"Are you sure?"



"Sure I'm sure. Surf's much better in Cali."

Matt smiled. "When?"

"I'll give my notice tomorrow. A month from now."

Matt stared at him, because even though this answer was obvious, he had not contemplated such an obstacle being in his way. A month. He had imagined taking James home the very next day. His eyes burned with treacherous tears that he thought were already well shed. "I can't be without you for a month. How am I supposed to...?" He couldn't say anything more and besides, James had gathered him close and now murmured words of reassurance to him.

"Come on, you can come see me once a week if you want to. It's only a month."

Matt knew he was being unreasonable, but the thought of losing James again for another month when he had only just got him back was more than he could bear.

"Don't," James said softly, stroking his head.

"Okay," Matt mumbled against James' chest. "I'll come up once a week. Want me to stay with you, or should I get a room here?"

The moment's brief hesitation on James' part was enough for Matt to raise his head and regard him questioningly. "You're living with David aren't you?"

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James went scarlet. "Yes, but it's not..."

Matt cursed and threw the covers back. He jumped from the bed and stalked naked into the living room.

"Wait." James followed him, pulling a robe on.

"I don't want to hear it. I see how it is."

He turned his face to the window and looked unseeingly out over New York.

"Listen to me." James grabbed his arm and wrenched Matt around to face him. "We share a house out of financial necessity. We have separate rooms. He wants me back, I won't lie about that, but I've been dragging my heels. I told him I needed time to get over you, but I would probably have gone back to him in time, just to let him soothe the fucking misery of being without you. I swear Matt, I'm telling the truth. I love you; you know that already and you know that I've been yours since the moment we met. Okay?"

Matt nodded, eyes downcast as James' fingers traced his cheek, and his lips touched his gently. If he had delayed any longer on this mission, James would have been back with David. The idea didn't bear thinking of. He pulled James close and kissed him. "I'm sorry. Being an asshole isn't easy to change."

James smiled against his mouth.

"Perhaps I can give you a deposit on being the nice 369

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guy so you know I mean it. Something you wanted, but I was too mean to give you."

James regarded him questioningly. Matt pushed his robe off his shoulders. Then he looked around the room. He took James' hand and pulled him after him.

"Here," he said, turning his back, pressing himself to the window. "So I can see New York while you're doing it."

"Doing what?" James asked in confusion, a hand trailing over Matt's bare shoulder.

"Taking me."

"Oh no." James stepped back. "That's not the sort of proof I want from you, Matt. I don't need you to put yourself through something you don't want. I don't want it that badly."

"Maybe I do. Maybe I want you inside me." Matt turned around.

James bit his lip. "I don't believe you. Why now?"

"Because I want to be *possessed* by you James. I want to know what that's like." Matt's own words made excitement dance in his blood. He had no idea where this offer had come from. He only knew he wanted it.

James still seemed reluctant. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Why not? I deserve it."

James stepped further back, shaking his head.

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"Right, that's it, no way. Do you think I'm going to fuck you as some sort of punishment? That's not going to happen."

"Listen to me..."

"No. Absolutely not." Picking up his robe, James turned to go back to the bedroom.

Matt caught his arm. "Please. I want you."

"Matt. I don't know how to explain this to you, but I don't *need* to have you. *Ever*. That's not something that matters to me. You don't have to offer yourself to me as a misguided attempt to prove your loyalty. Do you understand?"

Matt hung his head. He nodded. "I don't want you to ever believe those things you accused me of. That I think you're somehow less than me because I fuck you. That's not true. You know that, don't you?"

James stroked his cheek. "Yes, I know that and perhaps you've heard of the phrase 'taking control from the bottom'?" He let the question hang in the air for a moment, and then he grinned devilishly.

Matt pulled him fiercely into his arms. "You bad boy. Don't I fucking know you've always pulled the strings?"

"I don't know what you mean." James continued to smile, even as Matt kissed him.

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"Like hell you don't. Seducing me every time I saw you..."

"Me seducing *you*? I don't think so."

"I know so. Leading me around by my dick."

"It's not my fault you do most of your thinking with it."

"Right, that's it." Matt picked James up and threw him over his shoulder. He carried him protesting and laughing into the bedroom and let him fall onto the bed.

James held his arms out. "Come here, beautiful."

And Matt fell into them in rapture.

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## Chapter Thirty-One

Matt had taken his hotel room for two days, and the next day James called in sick to work. The two of them lay in bed until midday, during which Matt received a call from Lewis. He groaned as his phone went off, let go of James and went to look for his clothes, which were still in a heap somewhere from the previous night. He found his cell in his pants pocket and brought it back to the bed, telling James, "I knew it."

"Okay," Lewis said briskly when Matt answered.

"You've had long enough. Tell me what the fuck is going on there."

Matt sighed. He held the phone out to James. "Say hello to Lewis."

James took the phone. "Hello, Lewis."

There were two whoops of delight on the other end of the line, and Matt rolled his eyes.

"Yes, Lewis, yes I am, yes, a month. Okay, you too, say hello to Nick." James gave the phone back to Matt.

Matt took it back. "Yes?"

"I take back every insult I ever threw at you over your lack of balls. They're big as watermelons.

"Thank you," Matt said haughtily.

"Are you in bed?"

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"Yes."

"That's fucking great, man. Oh my God, I'm so happy for you."

"Thank you, Lewis. And you know I owe you, right?" His gaze slid sideways to James, who curled into him, smiling.

"Yes, I do know that, and when you're getting married I'll mention all this in my speech."

Matt's face flamed. "I don't think we need to get carried away."

"We'll see," Lewis said smartly. "You back tomorrow then?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, come over and see me."

"Will do."

"Bye Matt."

"Bye." Matt put his cell on the table. "Now," he said, tightening his hold on James and kissing the top of his head. "Where were we?"

\* \* \* \*

They finally ventured out of their seclusion to sightsee in the city. James then went home to get changed and Matt demurred on accompanying him because he didn't 374

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want to run into David. By seven-thirty, James returned to the lobby of the Waldorf where Matt waited to take him to dinner.

James looked amazing, smartly dressed in a pale grey shirt and black pants. Matt couldn't take his eyes off his glowing porcelain skin or his beautiful eyes, or the flash of his white teeth as they made their way on foot down the street, seeking a

restaurant.

Matt chose somewhere hugely expensive and ignored James when he protested, holding the door open for his lover and bundling him inside. On many occasions through the dinner, James had his hand on Matt's thigh beneath the table, and Matt really didn't care who saw.

They didn't talk much because a slow melancholy overtook Matt as the time to say goodbye for a week grew closer. He didn't want to go home, and he didn't care if it meant sitting in his hotel room all day waiting for James to finish work and come to him. He would do it. But he knew his idea was unreasonable when he had a business to run at home, something which needed sustaining because he had promised to treat James like a prince, and he always kept his promises.

So they drank a little too much champagne, Matt paid the bill, even though James dug his credit card out and tried to thrust it into the waiter's hand, and then they 375

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walked slowly back up Park Avenue with their shoulders brushing, murmuring softly to each other.

Back in the room, they made love in the bath, James astride Matt, water cascading onto the floor as they moved together, eyes open and fixed on each other's.

\* \* \* \*

Matt's flight left at ten the next morning. They woke in each other's arms and kissed lazily. James slid down beneath the covers to give Matt a blowjob. After a few gloriously selfish minutes, Matt tossed the covers off. He stretched out sideways on the bed and pulled James into position, making it clear what he wanted. James groaned in satisfaction as they sucked each other off simultaneously.

Matt tongued his balls, stroked behind them, sought James'

entrance with a wet finger. James' writhing encouraged him. He pressed kisses to James' thighs, pushed his tongue between his pert cheeks. James cursed. He pulled his knees up, lifted one high, spreading himself, making his need plain. Matt didn't need it offered. He sought the tight little hole, licking, wetting thoroughly so James shuddered under each stroke. And when James manoeuvred Matt with his hands, spread him, let him feel what Matt had refused that time in the shower, Matt moaned with the pleasure of new 376

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discovery. Here marked a new facet in his sexual relationship with James. Another milestone along the road of giving himself completely.

James came from a combination of Matt's steady tongue and a hand around his cock. He fell limply away from Matt, lying so still that he looked almost dead.

Matt was amused rather than disappointed. He straddled his lover's hips and jerked himself off over James'

stomach. James groaned in delight, wanton and undulating beneath him, pulling Matt close when he had finished.

After a shower they sat down in robes to breakfast, but Matt couldn't eat. "Hey," James said softly as Matt nursed his coffee cup. Matt looked up from the contemplation of the brown liquid.

"It's only a week."

Matt lowered his head again.

"Would you feel any better to know I feel the same?"

"That I'm going to miss you like you're dead?"

Matt closed his eyes and bit his lip hard. James immediately got up, came around the table and placed himself on Matt's knee, holding him fiercely.

All the way to the airport they held hands surreptitiously in the cab. When they



got out and Matt hoisted his bag onto his shoulder, they loitered a moment before the automatic doors into JFK. It was raining hard, 377

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and James unfurled an umbrella which he held over both their heads.

"I don't want to go in," Matt murmured. "I need to kiss you."

James touched his arm. He moved away, along the side of the building. Matt followed until they were some distance away from the main doors. Then he leaned back against the wall and held his umbrella right behind Matt's head.

"Come here."

Without hesitation, Matt placed one hand on the wall above James' head and the other on the back of his neck and leaned in, kissing James tenderly while the umbrella held them cocooned in their own little world, only two sets of legs visible to give a clue that there were two men kissing outside the airport.

When the kiss broke, both men were silent, looking at each other a moment in quiet contemplation before Matt moved away, and James walked by his side back to the airport doors. When they paused there, Matt said quietly,

"Don't come in."

James opened his mouth to protest, but then simply nodded. Matt reached into his bag and drew the antique copy of *Wuthering Heights* free, wrapped in shiny paper.

"For you."

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James took it in surprise.

"Open it when I've gone," Matt said. His hand by his side, his fingers found James', holding and caressing for a moment before he let go. "See you next week." The lump in his throat caused his voice to waver.

James nodded. He clutched the present to him. His eyes were swimming. "I love you."

"I love you too," Matt said. Abruptly he turned and walked through the doors before he started crying like a baby. He didn't look back at James. He loaded his bag into the X-ray machine, while inside he howled.

\* \* \* \*

Outside, James walked swiftly away. He crossed the road, sank down at a bus stop and closed his umbrella. He wiped the back of his hand roughly across his face before he ripped the paper away from the present.

Inside was the copy of *Wuthering Heights* he had stupidly bought while drunk to piss Matt off, and which the seller had never contacted him about, so he thought he had got away with it scot-free. He turned the antique over in his hands and smiled as he caressed its cover and spine and flicked through its pages.

When the bus came, he got on and sat at the back 379

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with the book under his coat, against his heart, and cried once more for the loss of Matt.

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## Chapter Thirty-Two

The morning that James came back to California for good, Matt dreamed of the whore named Amber and how he had not been able to keep his erection when she rode him, due to the pain in his shattered pelvis. He dreamed of James coming into the room, of him begging his nurse for morphine, of how James had stroked his face gently and told him it was okay, a moment before he had kissed him.

He felt the kiss in his dream. The most important and wonderful kiss he had ever had in his life. He woke up with a smile on his face thinking , *this is the day when the love of my life comes back to me.*

He had been through traumas in the past month, stricken with insecurity. As soon as he had cleared security and arrived at the carousel for his bag after that first time in New York, he was on the phone to James. He was convinced James would have changed his mind in the five hours it had taken Matt to fly to LAX. He was sure once he was away James would remember what a bastard he was, and renounce Matt for good.

"Hey," James answered. His voice was like molten honey, so filled with pleasure and feeling that Matt melted, his legs almost sagging with relief there at the carousel, surrounded by tired travellers.

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"Hey," he said. "I miss you."

"Oh Jesus," James responded. "I miss you more."

"Fuck, this might be getting old already, but I don't know how I can go without you for a month."

"A week," James reminded him. "A week."

"Yeah," Matt said miserably. "Listen, my bag's coming. I'll call you again when I get home."

"Okay, Matt," James said softly. "Bye."

"Bye." Matt hung up. He hadn't spotted his bag.

Instead, he made his way to the bathroom and locked himself in a cubicle while he got a grip on his emotions.

The phone bills were horrendous from then on.

From the start, Matt insisted on being the one to call James, and he did it at least three times a day. He called when he reached the office, knowing James would be up for work despite the time difference. At nine-thirty, he usually caught him having his morning coffee. Sometimes James overslept, and when he answered blearily, he thanked Matt profusely for awakening him. At these times, Matt imagined him warm and cosy beneath his duvet. He would lower his voice and ask James what he was wearing, and it usually led to James moaning through the phone and talking Matt through what he was doing beneath the covers, while Matt eyed his office door and jerked off frantically.

Dirty phone calls weren't restricted to the morning.

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Most often they happened at night with them both in bed, since James retired early when he had to be up in the morning. But most of the time, the two laid curled in separate beds murmuring sweet nothings of love to each other.

Sometimes James would be so tired that he would fall asleep during a lull in the conversation. Matt would think to himself, *no way is my man going to work so hard when he lives with me.*

Of course, James wouldn't be living with Matt.

Their living arrangements were something they had failed to discuss before Matt had left New York that first time, but they discussed it when he went back there a week later, embracing fiercely at the barrier as Matt came through customs. He had been tormented with it for a week, and after the initial desperate, half-clothed sex the moment they got through the hotel room door, he had asked James the question.

James had hemmed and hawed and responded in the negative; that he wanted to keep his own house. But, he added, as he saw Matt's despondent face, that didn't mean he wouldn't stay at Matt's house several times a week.

Because of this, Matt's insecurities continued, despite visiting James three times in New York. He was still convinced that somewhere along the line, with a month 383

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to think, James would change his mind. Did he want to live at his own house because he thought Matt might be controlling and possessive? Or did he think they would peter out within a few weeks, their grand romance fading away without the desperation of rarely being together?

Either way, it was enough to fan the flames of Matt's misery.

Unlike previous times, he confided in Lewis. Lewis did his best to ease his mind. He asked Matt to point out any evidence James had given from his telephone calls that he was having second thoughts. Matt could not. Lewis told him that he had spoken to James regularly, and James was in exactly the same frame of mind as Matt. Missing his lover desperately and worried Matt would renege on everything.

This knowledge soothed Matt's anguished soul a little. He sent red roses to James in New York, and James responded by sending white ones to Matt. Matt kept them by his bed, along with a card in which James spelled out his feelings.

A couple of days after they had first parted, Sooty came up in conversation. James told Matt that he had reluctantly left his cat behind with Michael because the apartment he and David were renting had a strict landlord who didn't allow

pets. Matt felt his hackles rise at this 384

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name. "I could take him until you get back," he suggested hopefully.

James had taken a moment to reply. "Sure."

Perhaps he didn't trust Matt around his cat, when the truth was, Matt would cherish the animal like he did James himself. He took Michael's address from James.

The next day, summoning his courage, because he didn't want to take the cat in a taxi, Matt drove his BMW

up to the quiet, tree-lined street where Michael lived. He parked at the bottom of the drive and walked up to the front door. A low-slung sports car sat in the driveway, and Matt couldn't help but grudgingly admire it. His left leg chose that moment to complain, and a twinge of pain made him wince and slow down his steps.

Damn it, the limp was bad enough; he didn't want to show up at this bastard's door like some sort of cripple.

Composing himself, he rang the bell and waited. In a few seconds he saw a shape approaching through the frosted glass. It swung open.

The lean blond eyed Matt coolly. "Hello."

"Hey."

Michael stepped back and gestured for Matt to enter. His house was nice; light and airy and scented with flowers. He disappeared into a door to his right, and Matt wiped his feet on the mat and followed him.

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An animal carrier sat on the wood floor with its door open. Michael walked across to a rocking chair in the corner. The large black cat curled there opened one eye and regarded him balefully.

*He remembers what an asshole I am*, Matt thought guiltily.

"Come on, babe," Michael addressed the cat, picking him up and cuddling him close while he carried him to the box. Sooty went in with a struggle, Michael's hand helping in his back legs and tail before closing the mesh door behind him.

He straightened up and fixed stony eyes on Matt.

"Hurt him, and you have me to answer to. And I mean both James and the cat."

Matt didn't allow his temper to rise at this. Kicking off with Michael again would not score him any points with James. James and he together meant that Michael was now very much a part of Matt's life.

"I'm not going to hurt him. I love him."

"Why should I believe anything you say? I know what you've done to him in the past."

In the past, Matt would have knocked Michael out for speaking to him this way. But that was the past and the old Matt. "I know, but in a few months, you'll realise I'm sincere."

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Michael regarded him scornfully. "Whatever, dude." He picked up the box and handed it to Matt.

Matt took it and headed for the front door. Once there, Michael passed him a bag which contained food dishes and toys for the cat. Matt stepped outside and

turned around. "I'm sorry I hit you."

Michael's face seemed to soften. He nodded. "I'm sure I'll see you around."

"Yeah." Matt turned away. He felt more at peace with himself as he went back to his car than he had in a while.

That morning he lay in bed for a while, watching Sooty, who stretched out at the foot of the bed, sleeping on the side James usually had. The cat became aware Matt had awoken, and stretched and yawned before sauntering up to greet him.

"Hey boy." Matt let his hand run along the feline's silky spine. After an initial period of distrust, he and the cat were firm friends. Truth be told, he treated the animal like it was James with four legs and a tail, buying it smoked salmon and caviar, allowing it free run of the house and petting it tirelessly so Sooty got the message and ran to Matt the moment he walked in the house these days, winding around his legs and purring.

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Today was the day James came home. Matt wouldn't allow his irrational paranoia—that James would leave Matt standing in the airport like the biggest love-sick fool that ever was—to consume him.

They had spoken last night, Matt mostly silent, allowing James to carry the conversation until finally, James asked his lover what was wrong. Matt had hesitated before responding in the lowest of voices, "I'm afraid."

James didn't need to ask him of what. "I know you are. But I'm going to be there. Everything's going to be okay. I swear to you, Matt. I won't let you down."

Why did Matt still have his doubts even after James'

heart-felt reassurances? When was he finally going to learn to trust him?

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## Chapter Thirty-Three

James' flight was on time and would be landing in five minutes. Matt sat nursing a coffee in the snack bar, tapping his foot anxiously. He tried to get himself together, angry at himself for this show of nerves, his palms sweating and his heart racing.

He was coming. He was coming, and Matt would never, ever let him go. He glanced again at the display screen above him. The plane had landed. Now there was only the interminable wait for baggage and security for James to wrestle with before he arrived. He stood up and moved over to join the throng of people awaiting loved ones. He couldn't get a place at the front, but he could see over everyone's heads just fine.

He couldn't believe the month's wait was finally at an end. It had felt like forever. His mind started to wander during the next twenty minutes, thinking of the love he and James would make that evening, hell that afternoon if Matt got his way, thinking of waking up tomorrow morning with James pressed against him.

People started to appear through the gate, rapidly snapping him back to reality as he scanned every face.

Maybe James had been sitting in the middle of the plane, which guaranteed him getting off last when they opened 389

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front and rear doors. Maybe he had been stopped at security for a random search of his bags. Matt's heart started to beat even faster as more people arrived and were met with hugs and kisses from relatives and friends.

Matt's brow settled into a frown and his shoulders slumped, a leaden weight wedging itself in his throat so he thought he would choke on it. James wasn't coming. He stared down at the ground for a moment as tears burned his eyes. *What am I going to do now?* he asked himself in blind panic, consumed with

anguish, and he lifted his head again, only to see James making his way down the tunnel, pushing a baggage trolley and scanning the crowd with eager eyes.

Matt lurched forward on trembling legs. He stopped short at the barrier and waited until James' gaze met his, and his mouth curved upward into a smile. He stepped away from his trolley and into Matt's waiting arms.

"Oh God, you're here."

Matt didn't realise he had moaned this aloud until James replied, "I'm here."

He couldn't let James go, despite the public setting.

He clung to him like a drowning man, almost weeping with joy, until finally, James gently disentangled himself and said softly, "Let's go."

Matt willed his feet to work. The two of them got rid of James' luggage trolley and collected his bags together 390

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as they waited for the elevator to the car park. Matt's heart beat harder with anticipation at the fact that no one else waited with them.

The doors slid open on an empty carriage and Matt had James pinned to the wall, kissing him fiercely before the doors were even closed. James moaned against his mouth, hands clutching hard at Matt's shoulders.

Matt broke the kiss to bury his mouth in James'

neck. One hand tangling in his hair, he groaned. "Oh God, I love you."

"I love you too," James responded breathlessly as he drew Matt's head up and kissed him once more so they were lost again, spiralling out of all control, hands moving beneath shirts to touch flesh.

A beep sounded above them, and the two slid apart instantly, lips kiss swollen, pupils huge with lust. They carried James' bags outside and Matt stared dazedly

along the rows of cars, looking for his own.

James laughed softly behind him, amused at his bewilderment, and Matt growled at him, "Just wait until I get you home."

"Promises, promises," James retorted lasciviously.

Matt thought he would moan aloud with frustration.

As they found his car, it was all he could do not to force James down over the hood right there. They slid inside, and 391

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Matt sat there a moment.

"James," he said quietly, "will you drive?"

"Sure." James took the keys from Matt and leaned over to brush his lips across his before getting out of the car to swap places. Matt may have been driving again, but he was still out of confidence, and the idea of battling a hard-on with James next to him all the way home was too hot to even consider. He slumped into his seat with relief and fixed his gaze adoringly on his lover as James backed out of the parking space.

"Stop staring at me," James rebuked him gently as the automatic barrier rose and he set off into the mid-afternoon traffic.

"I can't help it. You're beautiful."

"No *you're* beautiful." James placed a hand on Matt's thigh and squeezed.

Matt smiled. He put his hand over James' and held it a while as they joined the freeway. When he let go, James moved his hand up Matt's thigh and onto its inner side, going slowly.

Matt caught his breath a little. "You naughty boy,"

he told James, as his hand moved further and further up.

"You can't do this while you're doing eighty on the freeway."

"Why not?" James turned his head to look at Matt 392

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momentarily. "I've always been a multi-tasker, and my right hand needs something to occupy itself." His fingers grazed Matt's balls through his jeans.

"Fuck, you're going to get us both killed," Matt said, even as he unfastened himself and allowed his aching hard-on to spring free of his boxers.

"Yeah, but what a way to go." James smirked and wrapped a hand around Matt's shaft.

Matt smiled, for a moment sinking back with eyes closed. A moan escaped his lips as James, with eyes fixed on the road, jerked him off leisurely. This was sexually shy James who had only had two men before Matt. James who had been embarrassed when Matt first tried to make a dirty phone call to him. James who would now jerk him off in his car while driving. And Matt wasn't even afraid that James would kill them both. At least he would die by James' side. He laughed a little.

James glanced at him, raising a sardonic eyebrow.

"Is this amusing rather than arousing? Do you want me to stop?"

"No!" Matt clamped his hand over James' as he made to take it away, causing him to cackle with laughter.

Matt regarded his profile, the curve of his dark lashes over the pale turquoise eyes, the smatter of freckles over his delicate nose. "God, you own me and you know 393

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it." The words tumbled from his lips before he could stop them.

James turned his head. He let go of Matt, and he frowned. "I'm sorry?"

Matt rubbed the heel of his hand between his eyebrows at seeing James' jaw set tight. "I didn't mean..."

"Didn't you?" James asked in a low voice. "Seems to me you think I have some sort of power over you, and you resent me for it."

"No, James," Matt said vehemently, shaking his head, his erection wilting, so he hurried to tuck it back in his jeans. "That's not what I meant." He was confused himself. He didn't know what his words had meant, only that they had caused his love pain.

"I'm a prick," he said with head lowered. "I'm so fucking terrified of this... grip you've got on me. That you're going to get tired of me for being so fucking..."

*lovesick* and *desperate* and dump me. But I don't want you to loosen your grip on me for one minute James, I swear."

Matt looked up at James through swimming eyes.

James' gaze shifted off the road to his and held for too long.

Abruptly he flicked his indicator on and started to brake, easing the BMW over onto the shoulder, slowing gradually to a stop.

He sighed, shifted the gear-stick into neutral and 394

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pulled on the brake, before sitting back and allowing his head to fall back against the head-rest. He gave a loud sigh, eyes closed.

In the silence which followed, Matt watching him anxiously, James muttered, "Fuck, Matt..." then he leaned forward abruptly and grasped Matt's face hard in his hands, bringing it so close to his own their noses touched.

"I love you," he said fiercely. "What is it about that you don't get? You own *me* the way I own *you*. I will never get tired of you, *ever*. There's nothing about you that I don't fucking adore. The only reasons I would ever leave you would be if you screwed around on me or beat me black and blue."

Matt closed his eyes and tears trickled from beneath his lashes. He clutched at James with a soft moan as James kissed him, his lips so gentle and tender that Matt's own lips sang with bliss, drinking James' kiss like the sweetest of nectar.

James drew back and rested his forehead against Matt's, eyes closed. His fingers traced the curve of his cheek and jaw, touching the scar. Matt took some deep breaths, calming himself and relaxing into the touch. His hand crept to the back of James' head and stroked his neck where his silky hair was cut close to it.

He sighed. "I love you," he said, feeling like he was 395

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wearing the phrase out, that soon it would cease to have any meaning for James.

James nodded. "I know. And you don't need to make me believe it, because I already do. Now let's go home and you can show me just how much."

Matt smiled hesitantly. He put a hand up to wipe at his wet face as James sat back and checked his mirrors, before pulling out into the traffic. Matt closed his eyes for a while, then reached for James' hand, pulled it onto his own thigh and held it there.

To his surprise, Matt had fallen asleep, only awakening with the feel of lips on his and James' soft voice. "Hey, we're here."

He opened his eyes and blinked a moment in confusion. "Sorry," he said sheepishly.

James smiled. "It's okay. I think you needed it. You look tired Matt."

Matt shook his head in denial, even though he felt exhaustion creeping over him now, a draining of all the stress he had been under, leaving him spent. He

climbed out of the car on weary legs, only wanting one thing—

James in his arms under the covers of his bed.

James opened the trunk and took out his bags. Matt moved to help him.

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"Is Severine here?" James asked as they went to the front door.

Matt shook his head, searching for his key, eyes closing in pleasure as James hooked an arm suddenly around his neck and kissed him. He somehow managed to get the door open while James remained attached to him, and they fumbled their way inside not breaking contact, bags falling to the floor. Matt gripped James by the waist and pushed him against the door. His lover moaned as he was devoured.

"Fuck..." Matt groaned against his neck as pelvis rubbed against pelvis and James groped him through his pants. "I'm not sure I can make it upstairs. I might have to take you right here against this door..."

"Do it," was James' breathy reply, and Matt growled in delight, seeking his mouth again, rubbing the bulge in James' pants momentarily before his hand moved to his belt and released it.

\* \* \* \*

Some time later they were lying on the couch in each other's arms, James dozing with his head against Matt's chest. Matt stroked his head and looked down at him. He spoke to James quietly. "I was horrified when I 397

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found out that Lewis and Nick were sleeping with each other. And I derided



them for it, when all the time I was falling in love with you. I lay there in that bed day after day denying my feelings, not realising all the while that you had rescued me."

James lifted his head. "I've got a confession to make. When I was lying with you on your bed that time and we were watching *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and drinking beer... I almost tried to kiss you. You turned your head away just as I was going to do it, and I missed my chance."

Matt's face broke into a broad smile. He liked to think that, drunk and pliable that night, he would have welcomed his nurse kissing him. He would have sank back onto the bed with James in his arms and allowed him to continue with that rescue mission of his; rescuing Matt's body, his heart, his mind, and his soul.

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# Epilogue

Sunlight gleamed on the platinum and diamond band Matt wore on his left hand as he reached out to the stereo to change CDs. He glanced over at James, who smiled, eyes on the road and hidden behind sunglasses, the wind whipping through his hair.

It was Matt's birthday, and they had started the beautiful summer morning off with James presenting him with the ring. The day had just gotten better and better after that, because after the lovemaking which followed, James agreed to put his house up for sale and move in with Matt.

After which, they had driven up the coast to a secluded little fish restaurant for lunch, where Matt said he wished to buy himself a birthday present.

James looked intrigued, but Matt refused to tell him where they were going, directing James to set off back down the highway, south, in the direction of Newport Beach.

The last few months had been like a dream. At Christmas, Matt had met James' parents and found out what it was like to be part of a family after so long with no real parents of his own. Expecting to be forced into separate bedrooms, he got a shock when he was instead allowed to sleep with James. James' mother clearly adored him from 399

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the start. Matt wondered just how thickly James had laid it on about Matt's being an orphan, and whether she just felt sorry for him, but the affection in her touch was obvious when she hugged Matt goodbye, and he felt grateful for it.

James later confessed, with much cackling, that his mother had told him Matt was 'the sweetest and nicest-looking boy'

she had ever met in her life. Matt was both embarrassed and flattered by this. Before he'd nearly died, and before he met James, nobody would have ever

thought to describe him as sweet. A complete bastard would have been a better term for him.

Their bliss continued into the New Year, when they took a trip to the Maldives, their own private beach providing much entertainment and sand in awkward places.

Nothing seemed to touch the bubble they were both in.

That day they would be spending the evening with Lewis, Nick and Joel. James had also invited Michael, whom Matt was actually starting to become fond of now they had a tentative truce.

When Matt directed him to pull in at the Ferrari dealership on West Coast Highway, James' jaw dropped.

"Shit, Matt, I know it's your birthday but..."

Matt smirked. He had increased in confidence behind the wheel, mainly due to James, who accompanied him in his car for special lessons whenever he could. These 400

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special lessons usually ended in nakedness; in or out of the car, but no one was complaining.

A fawning salesman descended on them the moment they stepped out of the car. Matt acted casual and aloof, like he bought Ferraris every day while James remained wide-eyed like a kid in a candy shop.

"Which one do you like?" he asked James when they had wandered around the showroom for a few minutes.

"I like the 430 Spider," James said. "Jeremy Clarkson on the BBC's *Top Gear* programme said it was, and I quote, '*just about the best car I've ever driven*'. I would probably stick my dick in its exhaust without doubt.

But hey, it's not my money."

Matt looked at him a moment and made a mental note to prevent James watching any more car shows, before he got arrested for sexually assaulting sports cars.

"My money is your money," he said in all seriousness, which caused James to redden and turn away because he hated Matt speaking that way.

"Hmm," Matt said, eyeing the convertible James spoke of. "Which colour?"

"Black is the only way to go," James said authoritatively. "It's the new black."

Matt rolled his eyes. He caressed the paintwork of 401

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the Ferrari, deliberately letting his hand continue off the door and onto James' bare arm. "Let's test drive the black then."

James' pupils grew large. His lover got way too excited over fast cars, which Matt just didn't do any more, not since one had almost taken his life.

He called the salesman over, and then, with the authority of a rich man and the leaving of his credit card and driver's licence, convinced the man to let him and James take the car out alone. Once he had procured the keys, he tossed them to James as they walked out of the showroom.

James caught them, looking confused.

"You're driving."

"What?"

"It's your car my love, you need to test drive it."

James stood staring in mute shock. James was addicted to shows about nice cars on TV, and Matt would usually find him watching one when he had time alone.

Matt hadn't forgotten that James had once told him he would love to own a

Ferrari, and he had been determined for a while to buy him one. His business had done even better than ever this last year, and his savings account had swelled to the point that he and James could live off the interest from it should they both give up work. James now 402

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worked in the ER in Long Beach, and both had already reduced their working hours to twenty-five a week, in order to spend more time with each other.

When James had confessed he owed a fortune on his Audi to an unscrupulous finance company with a ridiculous rate of interest, Matt had taken it upon himself to call the company and pay James' debt off right then in one go.

He had expected James to be angry about this, but instead his lover was embarrassed and grateful, grateful to the point of the best blowjob Matt had ever had. He wondered what kind of sexual favours a Ferrari would warrant, and smirked to himself.

"Oh no." James shook his head firmly. "It's your birthday. Do you really think I'm going to let you buy me a Ferrari on your birthday? Or any other time for that matter?"

Matt clucked his tongue. "You don't *let* me do anything, James. I do what I want. You merely agree with it."

James raised an eyebrow, and Matt wondered if he'd gone too far, even though he had only been trying to rile him light-heartedly. They had had one fight in the whole of their time together, when David had called James while Matt was in bed with him back in October.

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Matt had leaned over to the bedside table to pluck up the cell and saw David's

name displayed. He had virtually hurled the cell at James and stormed off into the bathroom. When he came out, James had glared at him stony-faced from the bed. "I was with David for eight years. He's my friend. I'm not going to stop speaking to him just because I'm with you."

Matt folded his arms and glared back, but James wasn't remotely fazed. He merely left the bedroom and went down the hall to sleep.

After only half an hour of sleeplessness Matt was in the spare room apologising, telling James he was a jealous bastard and he couldn't help himself; because James was so beautiful Matt was afraid everyone in the world would try to take him away.

James merely rolled his eyes and kissed him.

"Everyone in the world?"

Matt held him hard and muttered something into his shoulder about killing him so nobody else could have him.

He had managed to keep his jealousy in check since.

James' face relaxed into a bashful smile. Maybe he remembered that fight, too. "Okay, I'm going to let you buy me a Ferrari, but I want my objection registered."

"Duly noted. Now get in the car."

Matt had to admit James looked like he belonged

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behind the wheel of a Ferrari, as he set off, sunglasses in place, the top down, one arm casually leaning on the door, a couple of fingers holding the wheel in place, like he had been driving this car all his life. *He really is a classy bastard*, Matt thought, *way too classy for the likes of me.*

"Zero to sixty in four point one seconds, top speed one nine six miles per hour,"

James recited, while he kept his speed at forty so as not to freak Matt out. "Six speed gearbox taking one fifty milliseconds to shift gear..."

As soon as he drew pause for breath in his litany, Matt drawled, "Shut the fuck up, nerd, and tell it to someone who gives a shit."

James huffed a little, pretending to be offended.

"And also," he concluded, "the best angled hood for fucking on as voted for by the readers of *Kinky Outdoor Fucking* magazine."

He smirked; eyes sliding slyly sideways to Matt.

Matt went from zero to rigid in roughly the same time as the car took to hit sixty, and his eyes must have gone a little glassy. "You need to pull over as soon as possible," he instructed.

James' smile widened, and he took the corner to an industrial park way too fast, so Matt clung to the door as the wheels sprayed up a shower of gravel. James pulled up behind a run down, abandoned building and switched off 405

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the engine.

"That hood's going to be burning hot," he remarked,

"too hot for my sensitive skin. You better go on bottom."

As they got out of the car, Matt gripped the front of James' shirt and pulled him in for a kiss. "You seem to be forgetting whose birthday it is. I decide who goes on bottom."

James wound his arms about his neck and nuzzled Matt's ear, lips sucking at the lobe gently.

"Point taken. Consider me your sex slave."

"That's every day of the year though. What are you going to do that's different

for my birthday?"

James slapped him on the ass and started to unfasten Matt's pants, looking around nervously as he did, before sinking to his knees. Matt lightly tangled his hand in James' hair with a sigh as he sucked him off, leaning back against the car, thinking birthdays didn't get any better than this.

James was only down there a couple of minutes before he stood up and took something from his pocket.

"Oh look what I've found," he said coyly, looking down at the tube.

Matt shook his head with a grin. "You're really just too bad."

"Well, seeing as it's your birthday, I wanted to avoid 406

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a sore ass; seeing as the chances of you wanting kinky public sex would be high," James said smartly.

Matt pulled James to him and started to unfasten his pants. "You talk like I'm some sort of pervert," he said nonchalantly as he drew James free and lightly slid him through his hand.

"Aren't you?" James gave a stifled moan.

"I wasn't until I met you."

James laughed. He moved to the car and bent over the hood, bracing himself on his arms; presenting himself.

"What are you doing?"

James looked over his shoulder. "Er... waiting."

Matt shook his head. "It's my birthday. And today, I want to get fucked."

James' eyes darkened as Matt pulled him up off the hood. He kissed him and



swapped places. Leaning over the car himself, Matt let his pants slide to his ankles.

"God..." James breathed, and he moved to stand behind Matt, lubricating his fingers, spreading his lover's buttocks with one hand while the other probed between them. "Are you sure it isn't *my* birthday, because it feels like it is."

"Why don't you cut to the chase before someone calls the cops and we spend the rest of my birthday with our asses in jail?"

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James gave a short laugh. He searched for his wallet in his pocket. While he waited, Matt occupied himself, unbearably aroused. As James had suggested, the hood was hot, but not so hot that he couldn't rub his cock against the satin paintwork, sighing a little as he lay with arms spread out, gaining some friction with his thrusts.

"What are you... are you... *humping* the Ferrari?"

"You better believe it." Matt looked over his shoulder. "You need to hurry up and fuck me before I come all over this baby and you have to explain the stains to the sales guy."

James groaned. "Jesus Christ, that has to be the hottest image I ever saw in my life," he said, fumbling in his pocket and backing away from the car. "Hold it right there."

"What the fuck are you doing?" Matt asked in exasperation as James produced his cell and held it up, clicking a couple of buttons. "No, Jesus, you can't..."

"Can't I? *You* spread out over a fucking *Ferrari*; I never had a wet dream better than this in my *life* before!

Just... lie back down and do that again."

Matt sighed, but secretly this titillated him. He laid back full length on the hood again, cheek resting on the hot metal and rubbed himself back and forth, moaning a little and smirking at the effect it had on James.

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The camera clicked a couple of times, and then a semi-naked body pressed him to the car, pinning his arms above his head, teeth nipping at his ear. "Fuck Matt, how is it even possible to get as hot as you are?"

Matt laughed, because he wondered the same about James all the time. He shifted himself deliberately against the erection prodding him. "Give it to me," he breathed.

They had done it this way more than a handful of times by now. Matt would never forget his first time; a few weeks after James came back from New York. Lying on his side with James behind him, rocking slowly into him until Matt couldn't distinguish pain from pleasure, and he came helplessly, twice, one after the other with James still inside him.

James stood up, rolled his condom on and used one hand to guide himself into Matt, gliding smoothly inside in one movement.

Matt groaned, damp palms leaving wet marks on the glossy black paint, as his torso slid across the hood with every thrust James made into him. He saw his own reflection on the surface of the car, his mouth open in ecstasy. As he lay there with the sun beating down on his back, letting his love pleasure him, his mind wandered.

Back to that car, trapped in the front seat, praying for death when no amount of morphine took the pain away.

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And then back in that bed with two nurses already down, and James Hayden walking into his bedroom and shaking his hand, leaning close to Matt to adjust his pillows so Matt smelled his scent and felt the warmth of his body and it caused something to ignite inside his cold heart.

*I loved him the whole time, from the moment he walked in the door. And yet I struggled and fought that love, afraid of giving myself to him, afraid I wasn't worthy of receiving his love.*

His lover's hands gripped his own, platinum and diamonds resting against each other. His pelvis pained him as James pressed him against the car. Matt embraced the pain as a reminder of how far he had come from that lonely, emotionally barren man lying in that hospital bed.

As James took him over the edge into orgasm and Matt moaned his joy there against the car, he knew no amount of Ferraris he could buy this man could ever express his love adequately. He would spend the rest of his life proving he was worthy of James.

They arrived back at the dealership half an hour later, sweaty and dishevelled, the hood stained with white, which had been rubbed away hastily with a crumpled tissue and merely smeared over the paintwork.

"I'll take it," James told the salesman with a smirk.

"It's a good ride."

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Matt almost choked and turned his flushing face away, muttering for the man to charge his credit card.

They drove back home separately; Matt in the BMW, James in his new Ferrari. Matt's cell rang as they approached the city limits.

"You need to clean your jizz off my new car."

"Do I?"

"Yeah. With your tongue."

Matt laughed. "Don't do this while I'm driving, man," he warned, mock-serious.

"Why not? It's a testament to how far you've come in regaining your confidence, that you can handle a dirty phone call while driving."

Matt's laughter faded away. "Listen..."

"You don't have to say it again," James cut in earnestly. "You don't have to tell me how grateful you are for what I've done for you, because I'm just as grateful; more than you know. This car here, which I don't fucking deserve by the way, is more than enough. Now I'm going to open this baby up and I'll be waiting at home for you in the shower. I love you."

He hung up, leaving Matt listening to buzzing static, his hands tightening on the wheel as the Ferrari left him in a trail of dust. He had crashed his car the same way. But lightning didn't strike twice. James would be waiting for 411

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him as promised. Matt knew he would. And their love would keep them warm the rest of their lives.

THE END

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About the Author

Scarlet likes cats and hats and firmly believes that the only thing better than one attractive man is two attractive men.

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*Into the Light* (Coming Soon) Available at ARe:

*Captive*

*Stand and Deliver*

*Life Class*

*Just Desserts*

*Beached Hearts*

*The Vampire's Prisoner*

*And So Is Love*

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